

MID-VALLEY

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KOBBI R. BLAIR | Statesman Journal

Gustavo Ayon, 20, talks about the technique he and other painters used to create the mural at the Salem Child Development Center.

Center's play area goes back to basics

Natural area takes shape with the help of donations

By RUTH LIAO
Statesman Journal

The playground for the Salem Child Development Center once was a loading dock for trucks, but a transformation is under way to turn the industrial setting into a woody, scenic play area.

Instead of metal jungle gyms and slides set in pea gravel, center leaders envision kids burrowing through a willow tunnel, picking leaves off edible shrubs and — naturally — getting into a lot of dirt.

"This has so much more imagination potential," executive director Sharon Thompson said.

The nonprofit center in north-east Salem serves 180 children and also runs after-school programs in the Mid-Valley.

The center's board and staff conceived the idea of a natural play setting in November 2008, but the down economy halted efforts to apply for grant funding.

Now, parents, staffers and members of the community are cultivating volunteer hours and donated goods to help keep the vision alive.

The design for the natural play area includes a forest-themed mural, woodchip areas and shrubs for the center's main playground. A landscaped hill, about 5 feet tall, is designed for the east garden as both a drainage and physical play feature. A living archway of trees also is planned for the east garden.

The project should cost as much

Get involved

The Salem Child Development Center is raising about \$110,000 for its improvements to its playground and backyard. Community businesses have helped:

Cascade Paving employees Travis Lange and Brad Reynoso volunteered to remove concrete and put in more natural landscaping.

Kraemers Nursery in Mount Angel donated plants and trees.

Highway Fuel delivered compost donated by Marion County.

Costco donated a wooden play structure.

Boys & Girls Club staffer Gustavo Ayon and teens from the downtown program painted a 30-foot high mural on the back of the Knights of Columbus building, which faces the center's playground.

Salem Child Development Center is at 1550 Fairgrounds Road NE in Salem. For information, call (503) 363-9821 or go to www.salemchilddevelopmentcenter.org.

as \$110,000: about \$80,000 for the center's main playground west of its building and \$30,000 for the landscaping of the center's east garden, Thompson said.

Homegrown efforts have led to various contributions: \$500 was raised through cereal-box-top collections, \$288 came in as cash donations and \$1,000 was raised from a cookie-dough fundraiser. Salem Foundation also gave the center a \$2,500 grant.

Many costs were defrayed through volunteer efforts and donations. The center still is raising money for the rest of the project.

Salem company Cascade Paving is donating labor costs for much of the landscaping and removing the asphalt. One of the company's divisions, Cascade Paving Hardscape Stones, is donating pavers to go around the vegetable gardens.

Last spring, the center removed two gravel pits and metal play structures from the main playground.

This week, workers began to remove part of the asphalt surface to create a woodchip area to surround a new wooden play structure, which was donated by Costco.

Board member Tonya Beard, whose daughter in kindergarten attends the center, is looking forward to seeing more greenery. She works as a botanist for Marion County Public Works.

"It's a great attempt at including things that are going to help kids be safe and secure but also let them know that your food comes from someplace other than food and grocery counters," she said.

More schools — such as Bush Elementary — seem to be turning to nature-scapes or gardens for children, Beard said.

"It's starting to catch on — getting kids out, working with the soil and the plants," she said.

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Natural Playground for Salem Childcare Center designed by LandCurrent

www.naturalplaygrounds.info/PDF/LC_cutsheet_SCDC_west08.PDF

http://www.landcurrent.com/contemporary/landscape_design.php?in=Salemilverfalls&work=playgrounds