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Wednesday, 07 July 2010 18:29

Riveredge officials see dismantling of house as an opportunity to learn

Officials at Riveredge Nature Center were excited when they acquired a privately owned nine-acre parcel in the heart of their maple sugarbush in the Town of Saukville in March.

However, they had no use for the brick ranch-style home, detached garage and cottage that came with the property. The residence on Hawthorne Drive had been home to the Pochert family since 1984.

Once it was decided that the structures should be removed, Riveredge Nature Center Executive Director Patrick Boyle saw the demolition as a teaching opportunity.

Instead of simply razing the buildings, the center chose deconstruction.

Materials were carefully salvaged, preventing tons of what would otherwise be waste from being sent to the landfill. To underline the educational value of the process, officials are keeping careful track of how much material is saved for reuse.

While a bulldozer may be the most expedient way to raze a building, deconstruction relies on a more exacting, hands-on approach.

Hand tools were used to dismantle the buildings, board by board and beam by beam, with the materials carefully sorted for reuse.

"The materials that will be recovered (typically over 80% of the entire home is salvaged or recycled) are going to the Sheboygan County Habitat for Humanity ReStore located in Plymouth," Boyle said.

"They, in turn, sell the donated materials back to the general public at an extremely reduced cost."

Materials already salvaged from the buildings include the kitchen cabinets and countertop, vanities, hardwood floors, and more than 500 pieces of lumber. When the month-long process is completed this week, twice that amount of lumber is
expected to be recovered.

The work is being coordinated by a Milwaukee firm called Pragmatic Construction, with help by a grant from the Milwaukee Social Development Commission.

The project is providing job skills for underemployed workers from Milwaukee.

Not only is the deconstruction teaching the laborers valuable work skills, Boyle said, he hopes the project is also opening eyes about the possibilities of recycling on a large scale.

"This project is a perfect fit for the Riveredge mission, which is to inspire, inform and enable responsible environmental decision-making. We hope it inspires people and organizations to re-examine the traditional demolition strategy where most building materials are sent to a local landfill," he said.

"Deconstruction is a much more friendly choice for the environment as tons of building materials are recycled. We thought it was an excellent opportunity to educate the community about this option.

"You just don't hear about projects like this, but I think people are opening up to better choices for the environment."

An open house at the site was held last week, offering the public a glimpse into the painstaking process of salvaging building materials. The environmental and financial benefits of the approach were also addressed.

Boyle said he hopes the deconstruction also makes people think about using recycled materials when tackling a building project.

"It will save you money and be the right thing to do," he said.

Once the building site is cleared, the area will be reforested. The parcel already has 60 sugar maple trees, along with red and bur oak, basswood, hickory, beech, birch and poplar trees.

With the Pochert property, the Riveredge sanctuary now cover 378 acres.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF the three-bedroom home on property acquired by Riveredge Nature Center in the Town of Saukville left plenty of salvaged building materials. Kevin Frazier sorted through salvaged boards destined for delivery to the Habitat for Humanity ReStore in Plymouth. Photo by Sam Arendt