

Belton Memorial Park Arboretum



On a cold and blustery morning in April 2017, Belton's hopes for promoting its arboretum came to a head as we dedicated our new arboretum kiosk. The need for a kiosk had become obvious not long after the arboretum opened. Even though the Arboretum had grown rapidly and quickly earned Level I and then Level II accreditation, most Belton citizens remained unaware of it even as they walked through it. Street signs and newspaper articles had helped considerably but, plainly, something was still lacking.

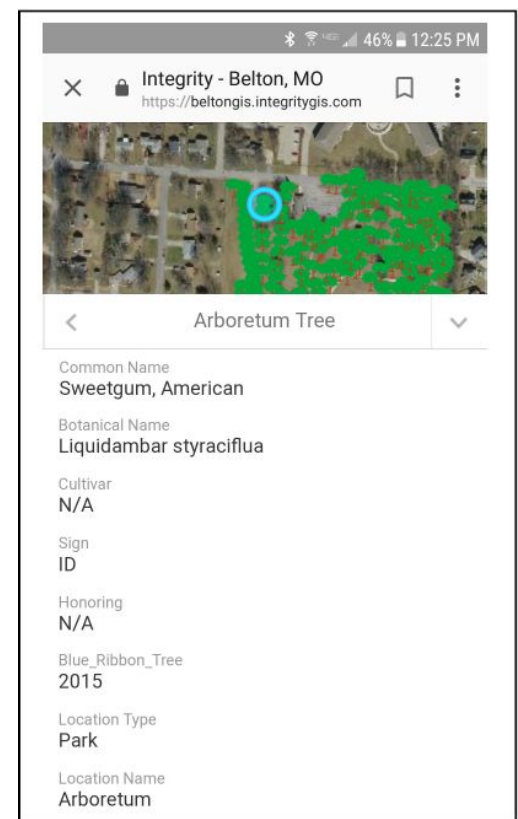
We needed both a means of attracting attention as well as an inexpensive but reliable means of distribution information. As part of that latter goal, we were mapping every tree via GPS so that visitors could use their handheld devices to locate and learn about the trees. Unfortunately, we had no way to tell visitors about this capability or other arboretum features. On a budget, the obvious answer was a kiosk and a walking tour map!

In 2016 we applied for the ArbNet 5th Anniversary Capacity Building Grant to help create a Walking Tour Map and Arboretum Kiosk. It was with great pleasure and anticipation that we received word that we were awarded a \$750 grant along with 5 other arboerta.

To involve the community and reduce cost, we reached out to scouts, businesses, and city departments to find resources and volunteers for the project. As a result, the building of the kiosk became a Boy Scout Eagle project. Building materials included repurposed lumber donated by our local electric company and cement donated by a local business.

As the project progressed we found that changes to design and materials were necessary to reduce cost as well as to reduce vandalism. To begin with, the kiosk display cases were changed to rubber mats with Plexiglas covers. And, though we had planned to buy a brochure box, we used leftover repurposed lumber to make one instead. Finally, we changed both the shape and location of the box to thwart vandals.

We also managed to save considerable time and expense on the walking tour map. Since we were already gathering and entering GPS data for our trees, the city GIS/IT Specialist was able to use that data to develop and print the Walking Tour Map. Although we tried to work within the existing data framework, a few minor programming changes were necessary to simplify the process and these billable expenses were applied to the project. Finally, after the basic Walking Tour Map and GIS website design had been completed, we found that we needed minor changes in the design and numbering to simplify use by those who did not want to use a smartphone.



Finally, after months of work and coordination, the Walking Tour Map and Kiosk was dedicated on April 22, 2017. A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held just prior to the Arbor Day Ceremony that was also held in the Arboretum. Thanks to newspaper coverage and social media coverage, turn-out for the event was excellent, especially considering the cold, blustery weather.

At the end of the brief ceremony and remarks, each attendee received a copy of the first draft of the new arboretum brochure. The kiosk may have been finished but work on that brochure would continue throughout the summer. Not only was the content still a work in progress but, due to the redesign of the brochure box, the brochure had to be redesigned as well. When finished, the new brochure contained a smaller map of the arboretum, general information about the Arboretum, and instructions for handhelds and GPS to access the website.

After completing the brochure and all components were finally in place, attempts to measure usage proved problematic. Attempts to use a security camera to count visitors to the kiosk were ineffective. And, while counts of website visits would seem to be trivial, the GIS website, which is accessed for a several types of “layers”, does not support counting “hits” when a specific layer was selected. Finally, the brochure box was not installed until the end of October 2017 and, to date, a rough count of brochures by the Arboretum Director has served to estimate kiosk visitor counts.



Even in the absence of accurate measures of use, however, the opportunity is obvious. The newly constructed kiosk and Walking Tour Map made possible by the ArbNet 5th Capacity Building Grant is visible throughout the Arboretum. Even the most casual visitor is now aware that the Belton Memorial Park is an arboretum. And, with a few clicks on a handheld, visitors can locate and learn about any one of the multitude and variety of trees and shrubs therein.

We are thankful to ArbNet, Boy Scouts, local businesses, the Parks Department, the City of Belton’s GIS/IT Specialist, and tons of volunteer hours for making this project possible. Each should be proud because, without the help of each, none of this would have been possible. But we are not resting on our laurels.

Looking ahead, 2018 events are expected to increase yet again educational opportunities afforded Arboretum visitors. For starters, an authentic Civil War era cabin is scheduled to be moved into the Arboretum by June of 2018. Also, a photo project will add to educational opportunities by including photographs of most trees in the various seasons. Finally, a multitude of educational events, including a Tree Keepers training session will be hosted in the arboretum in 2018!