



# The Rooftop Garden and Learning Center project in the works at Riverbender.com Community Center

by Brittany Kohler, Content Manager  
June 2 2015 3:28 PM



With the Riverbender.com building being the tallest structure downtown Alton, the rooftop overlooks a great stretch of the downtown area along the river. The owner of the building, John Hentrich, looks at his rooftop with a dream of something great for the youth, a one-of-a-kind Rooftop Garden and Learning Center.

The idea of a Rooftop Garden and Learning Center started about three years ago and after much planning and brainstorming, the first phase of the project is finally within reach.

“The main reason I wanted to do this project is because our community center is in the middle of downtown and we don’t have a place to get outside and enjoy fresh air,” said John Hentrich, owner of Riverbender.com. “There are a lot of opportunities for the kids to learn out here and it adds an exciting element to what we can offer.”

John has reached out to the community in hopes that others will grasp his vision. The Alton Home Depot has committed to a great part of the process to get things started and is graciously donating the materials and labor to complete the first phase.

“When we go into a community, we become a part of it,” said Brian Belchik, Home Depot Store Manager. “When John called me and told me his plans for a rooftop garden, I knew right away I wanted to be part of it. That’s right up our alley.”

One major part of the project is an elaborate rooftop garden, maintained by the kids at the community center. Last week, the Riverbender.com Community Center Director of Operations, Meredith Wright, took a small group of kids to the rooftop to plant flowers, fruit and vegetables in a vertical Tower Garden, donated by John Simmons of Simmons Hanly Conroy. This was the first step in getting the ball rolling.

“The thing that I like the most about this project is that it is something totally different than what anyone else can offer,” said Wright. “You always hear about summer activities being focused around sports, music and arts, I think it will be really cool to have a place that deals with the agricultural side and show kids that there is a lot to learn.”

Yesterday, Home Depot representatives came for a site survey and to get some initial dimensions and plans for the first big step of the project, which is getting a safety railing installed around the top of the roof and a raised deck built in the southeast corner of the building, facing the Clark Bridge.

“We’re going to deck it out with solar stuff and wind turbines to save energy,” said Belchik. “We’re are going to bring it all up to modernization with LED lighting and lots of other cool stuff.”

The deck will house the garden, cultivating fruit and vegetables for the kids to sell at the farmer’s market, hosted by Alton Main Street.

“It’s going to be very pretty, very nice and very scenic,” said Belchik. “I think the kids will be able to appreciate Alton a little bit better up here than from a ground level view.”



The Alton Area Landmarks Association has expressed interest in helping the Community Center document the historic landmarks and structures seen from the Riverbender.com rooftop. There is much to learn from a bird’s eye view of the landscape of such a historic river town, the Riverbender.com building is arguably in the perfect spot for such a venture.

“If you look over the side of our building and see all the historic buildings around us, there’s a lot of opportunity to learn about our history,” said Hentrich.



The learning center will cover agriculture, history, astronomy and many other topics such as conserving energy with solar panels and wind turbines.

“This project is about kids and education and that falls right in line with the Home Depot values,” said Belchik. “I want to be a part of it, I can’t wait to be a part of it, my bosses are excited about the project, and it’s a great partnership.”

Eventually, the rooftop will be a space that groups or organizations can rent for events or classes and the proceeds will go to the community center to help fund the many programs the center offers throughout the year.



“I am glad Riverbender is reaching out to us,” said Belchik. “As a person that has lived in Alton my entire life, 46 years, and John being from Alton; here you’ve got two people expanding their hometown, I think it’s a great thing.”

For others who would like to volunteer, donate to the Riverbender.com Community Center's mission, or get involved in any other way please contact our Director of Operations, Meredith Wright at 465-9850 x212 or check out the volunteer application on our website at [www.riverbender.com/communitycenter](http://www.riverbender.com/communitycenter).

