

## BERKS NATURE

# SEEDING THE FUTURE

### \$28 million donation will support nonprofit's strategic plan

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Berks Nature has received a \$28.5 million donation that will enable the nonprofit to venture into a bold expansion of its environmental and conservation programs, President Kim Murphy announced Thursday.

The donor's identity was not disclosed.

The donation is the largest the 47-year-old conservation organization has ever received. Berks Nature was formerly The Berks County Conservancy.

About \$3.5 million of the donation will be dedicated to a second-floor addition with a rooftop deck and classroom at the The Nature Place in Reading, she said at a groundbreaking for the expansion.

The remaining \$25 million will be given to the Berks County Community Foundation to create the Berks Nature Endowment Fund and will benefit Berks Nature's operations in perpetuity.

That will add about \$1 million — or 4.5% of the endowment — to operations annually.

Berks Nature already has a \$3 million endowment. Endowments are designed to keep the principal amount intact while using the investment income for charitable efforts.

Murphy and Berks County Community Foundation representatives declined to elaborate on the donor, saying only that the donor is someone with which Berks Nature has had an ongoing relationship.

Murphy said the money will support executing a new strategic plan recently adopted by the board of directors.

"Our new strategic plan outlines our commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, to climate change, to our community, and to the future generation of conservationists," Murphy



BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE

Berks Nature officials and others gather Thursday after a groundbreaking ceremony for a second-floor addition with a rooftop deck and classroom at the The Nature Place in Reading. They are, from left, Kim Murphy, Berks Nature president; City Councilwoman Lucine Sihelnik; Eric Jenkins, Berks Nature board chairman; and Eric Burkey, president of Burkey Construction.



BEN HASTY — READING EAGLE

Berks Nature President Kim Murphy announces Thursday that the organization has received a \$28.5 million donation.

said. "In short, we seek to transform people's relationship with nature."

### The expansion

When completed, the rooftop deck and classroom building will

accommodate about 300 people.

The expansion will add 7,700 square feet over top of the existing Nature Preschool building and will include a patio, classroom, small kitchenette, storage and a ground floor covered space with a fireplace.

Construction is set to begin in June and last through December. Burkey Construction, Reading, will be the builder, and Barry Isset and Associates is the civil engineer. The addition was designed by GWWO architects in Baltimore, the same architects

that designed The Nature Place.

Since it opened, Berks Nature has known The Nature Place needed a covered area to accommodate large groups of children on field trips and large groups for programs, Murphy said.

The LEED-certified Berks Nature headquarters opened in 2017 at the edge of the 100-acre Angelica Creek Park, a recreation and conservation area created through the partnership of Berks Nature, Reading and nearby Alvernia University. LEED **NATURE » PAGE 2**

## Nature

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(Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a green building certification program.

Murphy said the goal for the The Nature Place is to expand its educational programs, increase profitability and grow the community's involvement in the preservation and appreciation of natural resources.

"We want The Nature Place to become the hub of environmental activity, community engagement and location for organizations to meet," she said.

### Focus on diversity

Murphy said Berks Nature wants to have multiple locations of its popular nature preschool as well as scholarships available so there are fewer barriers for people to share in that experience.

The organization already visits many classrooms in the county. Murphy said Berks Nature will continue to become more diverse and inclusive with attention paid to urban Black, indigenous and other people of color.

"We look to be active in and include and nurture our urban communities to become involved in our organization, take responsi-

bility for nature in their community and pursue conservation as a career path," Murphy said.

Berks Nature wants to increase opportunities for individuals and groups to connect with nature, advocating for a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

### Conservation goals

The endowment will also help Berks Nature achieve conservation goals.

Murphy said the money could be used to match funds from other sources such as the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to protect land from development.

She said Berks Nature will expand its land protection and watershed restoration and recreation activities.

"We want all open space and agricultural land identified in the Berks County 2030 Comprehensive Plan to be permanently protected by conservation easements or outright purchase," Murphy said. "And we want to see that trails connect to key hubs and preserves."

### Building up staff

Murphy noted the conservation organization has long been understaffed. Despite that — and the COVID-19 pandemic — it was able to accomplish a lot in

the last 18 months.

"We did some amazing things last year, continued to protect land, worked hard on restoring watersheds, working with farmers to improve management practices on their farms to protect water," she said. "We kept our Nature Preschool open and created Camp for School program for families who needed help with virtual learning."

She noted city gardens as well as the trails and preserves remained open, and that staff and volunteers planted thousands of trees.

Murphy said Berks Nature plans to add staff. She did not say how many more employees but the number will support the new initiatives and goals outlined in the strategic plan.

The organization will still seek to raise money, she said, and it will focus on diversifying its funding. The endowment will enable Berks Nature to be sustainable for the long term, she said.

"While grant writing and fundraising will always be a part of the culture of our organization, this gift will allow us to essentially catch up for years of underfunding and stabilize the organization well into the future, positioning us to consistently exceed expectation in our work and impact," she said.



GWWO ARCHITECTS

A rendering from GWWO Architects of what the upcoming addition to the Berks Nature's The Nature Place will look like.