

Pining for Green Space

Group hoping to save Red Bank's 'Central Park,' potentially home to the state champion tree, lays out its case

BY LISA DENTON



THE FUTURE OF AN OPEN 12-ACRE TRACT ON DAYTON BOULEVARD, THE FORMER RED BANK MIDDLE SCHOOL SITE, IS BEING DEBATED BY CITIZENS AND CITY OFFICIALS.

To the untrained eye, the 12-acre tract in the middle of Red Bank's central business district may resemble little more than a vacant lot.

Longtime residents remember the property as the former home of Red Bank Middle School — and of Red Bank High School before that. After both schools eventually relocated off Morrison Springs Road, the existing buildings were torn down in 2013 to make way for the land's next chapter.

Since then, the plot has offered little more than

grass and trees to passersby. But a vacant lot is not an idle lot.

"There are plants and animals that already call it home," said Don McKenzie, who lives nearby.

Since September, McKenzie and fellow resident Lawrence Miller have been working to identify the flora and fauna thriving at 3715 Dayton Blvd.

"There's life there," said Miller. "There's 50 species of birds. There's a resident red fox that lives at the park. We've seen him numerous times."

Together, they've documented just over 100 species of plants, and they expect to identify more when the spring flowering season begins. McKenzie, whose education and career experience are in wildlife management, said the 50 bird species were "way more than I expected to find."

Perhaps their biggest discovery has been a towering Virginia pine, one of two growing in a far back

corner amid a larger cluster of hardwoods and shortleaf pines. Preliminary research suggests that the taller of the two could be the largest Virginia pine growing in Tennessee, perhaps even surpassing the biggest Virginia pine growing in Virginia.

"It was the largest I'd ever seen anywhere," McKenzie said. "It was so big, it made me start doubting myself."

He called in a professional forester, who had the same reaction. "It's definitely a Virginia pine, but it's just so darn big," McKenzie said the forester told him.

"We got out our books