San Mateo County Libraries

Agenda Item IV. E.

To: JPA Governing Board

From: Anne-Marie Despain, Director of Library Services
Danae Ramirez, Deputy Director

Date: September 10, 2025

Meeting: September 15, 2025

Re: Atherton Library Children's Garden Project

Background

The Atherton Library, completed in June 2022, is a thoughtfully designed example of modern civic architecture — a warm, light-filled single-story space that has quickly become a cherished hub for the community. The library is widely praised for its architectural beauty, environmental sustainability, and inclusive and innovative programming.

The 9,601 square foot library building, adjacent 625 square foot Heritage Room, outdoor areas, and surrounding land are owned and maintained by the Town of Atherton and operated by San Mateo County Libraries under the Joint Powers Authority (JPA) Agreement.

During the planning phase for the new library, community members expressed interest in a children's garden that would echo the charm and function of the children's garden at the former library. While the idea was well-received, it was ultimately not included in the original construction plans due to budget and timing constraints.

We are pleased to share that the vision for a Library Children's Garden has been revisited. Design plans have been developed and approved by the Town Council. First approved as a project in FY 2024–25, and in alignment with our 2025-2030 Strategic Plan goal to enhance and update facilities to create inviting and flexible spaces, the Children's Garden is now actively progressing, with completion anticipated in Spring 2026. This report provides an update on the project, including a summary of key activities and an estimated timeline for completion.

Discussion

San Mateo County Libraries contracted with Miller Company Landscape Architects (Miller) to conduct a community engagement process, evaluate potential garden sites, and develop a final design and cost model for approval. The goal of the project is to

create a developmentally appropriate outdoor learning environment where children and their families can connect with and explore nature through open-ended play.

The garden design was developed following a community engagement process that included early input from the Atherton community, library neighbors and the Friends of the Atherton Library. In addition to a series of public workshops, input was gathered onsite by displaying the design presentation boards in the library, allowing community members who could not attend the meetings to view the concepts and leave comments.

Beyond the public engagement activities, the project team also coordinated directly with the Friends of the Atherton Library and adjacent property owners to review feedback and discuss design ideas. Based on this collaborative process, Miller created conceptual designs that reflect the input and priorities of key stakeholders, including the community, neighbors, Friends, staff and Town.

The final design for the reimagined 6,500 square foot Children's Garden places it just outside the existing makerspace deck. Thoughtfully integrated with the site's mature redwood trees, the garden will feature a whimsical willow hut, boulder mound, natural branch tunnel, and an accessible tree house structure that will invite social interaction and imaginative play. Visitors will be able to explore the garden along an accessible engineered wood fiber pathway system that connects each of these playful elements. Native plantings will be woven throughout the space, enhancing the natural beauty and ecological value of the garden.

On February 19, 2025, the Atherton Town Council reviewed the project design and layout. Since then, the Planning Commission has approved the plan and permits. The project is currently in the bidding phase with three bids submitted. Approval of the construction contract will be presented to the Town Council on September 17, 2025.

As the facility owner, the Town will oversee construction of this Atherton Library Children's Garden. Funds to support this project are allocated through the Library JPA as part of the Library Restricted Excess Funds. The preliminary cost estimate completed in November 2024 was $415,000 for construction (market dependent) and $60,000 for Town-contracted construction management and inspection services. Actual prices will be determined based on contractor bids obtained through a competitive process.

In coordination with Town of Atherton staff, a project construction plan and timeline are currently being established. During construction, the Makerspace deck will not be available for use. Despite the temporary closure, the Makerspace will remain open with active programming. Any programs that are held on the Makerspace deck will be moved to temporary locations at the Town Center or Holbrook Palmer Park.

We look forward to opening and celebrating the new Atherton Children's Garden this spring.

Fiscal Impact

Staff recommends approval of $600,000 to support the estimated project cost, as reflected in the Final FY 2025-26 Adopted Budget and Proposed Uses of Restricted Library Funds, included in this agenda.

Recommendation

Recommend JPA Governing Board acceptance of the Atherton Library Children's Garden Project. Operations Committee members present at the September 9, 2025 meeting concurred with this recommendation.

Attachment

Atherton Town Council Report, Provide Feedback and Direction Regarding the Atherton Library Children's Garden Project, February 19, 2025, ATT 1 - Atherton Library Children's Garden Layout and Images

Item No. 7
Town of Atherton

CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT - REGULAR AGENDA

TO: **HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL**
GEORGE RODERICKS, CITY MANAGER

FROM: **ROBERT OVADIA, PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR**

DATE: **FEBRUARY 19, 2025**

SUBJECT: **PROVIDE FEEDBACK AND DIRECTION REGARDING THE ATHERTON LIBRARY CHILDREN'S GARDEN PROJECT**

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Council provide feedback and direction to staff regarding the Atheron Library Children's Garden design and the potential for the Town to provide assistance through construction including management and oversight of the bidding process and construction management and inspection services for the project.

BACKGROUND

The Town and the San Mateo County Libraries (SMCL) Governing Board approved the use of restricted library funds for an Atherton Library Children's Garden and project management in 2024. SMCL contracted with Miller Company Landscape Architects (Miller) to reimagine the space behind the Atherton Library to provide a developmentally appropriate outdoor learning environment for young children and their families to connect with and explore nature through open-ended play.

The garden design was developed after a community engagement process, which included input from the Atherton community and the Friends of the Atherton Library. Input was gathered by holding a series of public workshops and collecting comments on-site by leaving the design presentation boards up in the library so that people who weren't present at the community meetings could leave feedback.

In addition to the public workshops and feedback, SMCL coordinated with the Friends of the Atherton Library (Friends) and adjacent property owners regarding the input received and improvement concepts and ideas. Through this engagement process, Miller developed conceptual designs that incorporated the feedback and input from the Friends, neighbors, and community stakeholders.

ANALYSIS

The reimagined 6,500 square foot garden will complement the existing mature redwood trees, incorporating a whimsical willow hut, boulder mound, natural branch tunnel, and an accessible tree house structure that will invite social interaction and imaginative play. The design provides for full accessibility throughout. A new ramp with handrails connects the existing northwest paved pathway to the existing deck area. New paving will provide an extended area adjacent to the library staff room and replace the existing decomposed granite paving that is currently degrading the building's siding. Community members will navigate through the ground level garden area on an accessible engineered wood fiber pathway system that connects the various elements. The garden will have native plantings throughout, adapted to grow in the context of the existing Redwood trees and be placed away from existing Oak trees. All new plants will be irrigated with a drip system.

The design is approximately 90% complete and prior to finalization, SMCL is seeking Council feedback on the project design and layout. Following Council feedback, the design team will prepare plans for submittal to Planning for review and for any variances (fence height, structure location [setbacks from property lines and existing buildings], height, etc.) that may be required for project approval, then to the Building Department for any required building permits. The design team and SMCL are finalizing some details regarding operational aspects, including hours, security (with PD), and fence height and access type from the Ashfield Road side of the garden.

Under the Library JPA Agreement, San Mateo County Libraries is responsible for library operations including staffing, services and programs, collections, furniture, fixtures and equipment, etc. Member cities are responsible for maintenance and repair, which includes utilities, janitorial, facility improvement costs including capital projects, etc. Library restricted funds may be used for these items.

The preliminary construction cost estimate for the project is approximately $415,000, not including contingencies, construction management and inspection services. Actual prices will be determined based on contractor bids obtained through a competitive process. Funds for the project are allocated through the Library JPA as part of the restricted funds approval process.

SMCL is seeking Town support to assist in bidding the project and for construction management and inspection (CM&I) services. Staff solicited a proposal from Interwest Consulting Group for CM&I services for the project. The estimated cost of CM&I services is approximately $60,000. Restricted funds would support these services.

FISCAL IMPACT

None at this time, however, next steps would incur additional costs.

Project construction costs, including CM&I would be funded through SMCL library restricted funds as noted above – approximately $415k for construction (market dependent) and $60k for construction management and inspection.

GOAL ALIGNMENT

This Report and its contents are in alignment with the following Council Policy Goals:

- Goal Area B – Preserve Small Town Character and Quality of Life
- Goal Area C – Create and Expand the Town Center/Library
- Goal Area F – Be Forward-Thinking, Well-Managed, and Well-Planned

POLICY ISSUES

The policy focus for this item is regarding Council direction regarding the proposed children's garden at the Atherton Library and Town assistance in implementation.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notification was achieved by posting the agenda, with this agenda item being listed, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting in print and electronically. Information about the item is also disseminated via the Town's electronic News Flash and Atherton Online. There are approximately 1,200 subscribers to the Town's electronic News Flash publications. Subscribers include residents as well as stakeholders – to include, but be not limited to, media outlets, school districts, Menlo Park Fire District, service provides (water, power, and sewer), and regional elected officials.

COMMISSION/COMMITTEE FEEDBACK/REFERRAL

This item ____ has or _X__ has not been before a Town Committee or Commission.

____ Audit/Finance Committee (meets every other month)
____ Bicycle/Pedestrian Committee (meets as needed)
____ Civic Center Advisory Committee (meets as needed)
____ Environmental Programs Committee (meets every other month)
____ Park and Recreation Committee (meets each month)
____ Planning Commission (meets each month)
____ Rail Committee (meets every other month)
____ Transportation Committee (meets every other month)

ATTACHMENT

Attachment 1 – Project Layout and images
Attachment 2 – Construction cost estimate

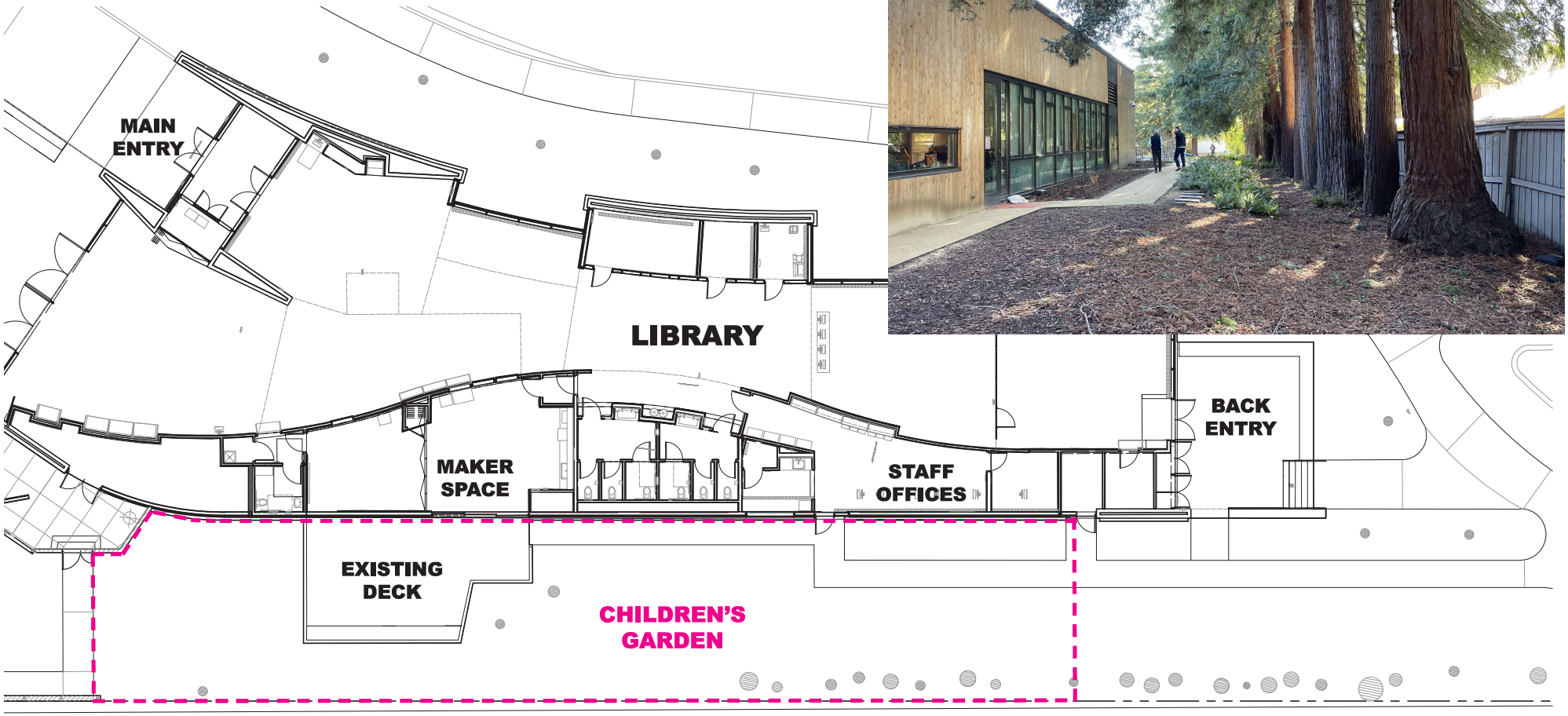
ATHERTON LIBRARY

CHILDREN'S GARDEN

02.04.2025

MILLER COMPANY
landscape architects

CHILDREN'S GARDEN SITE MAP

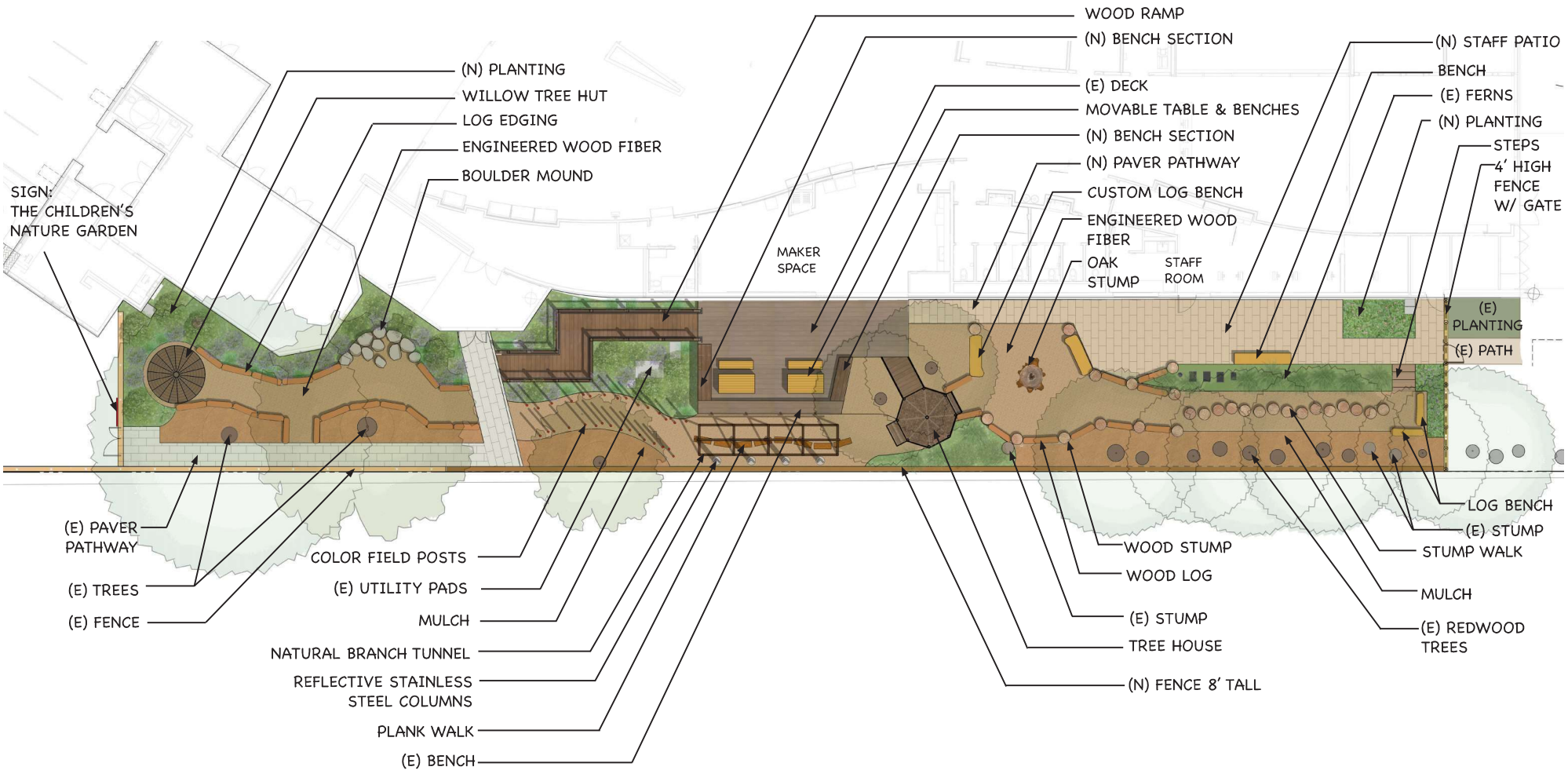


SCALE: 1" = 16'

0' 16' 32' 48'

MILLER COMPANY landscape architects

CHILDREN'S GARDEN DESIGN - ILLUSTRATED PLAN



CHILDREN'S GARDEN - STRUCTURES

WILLOW HUT

TREE HOUSE

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - BOULDERS

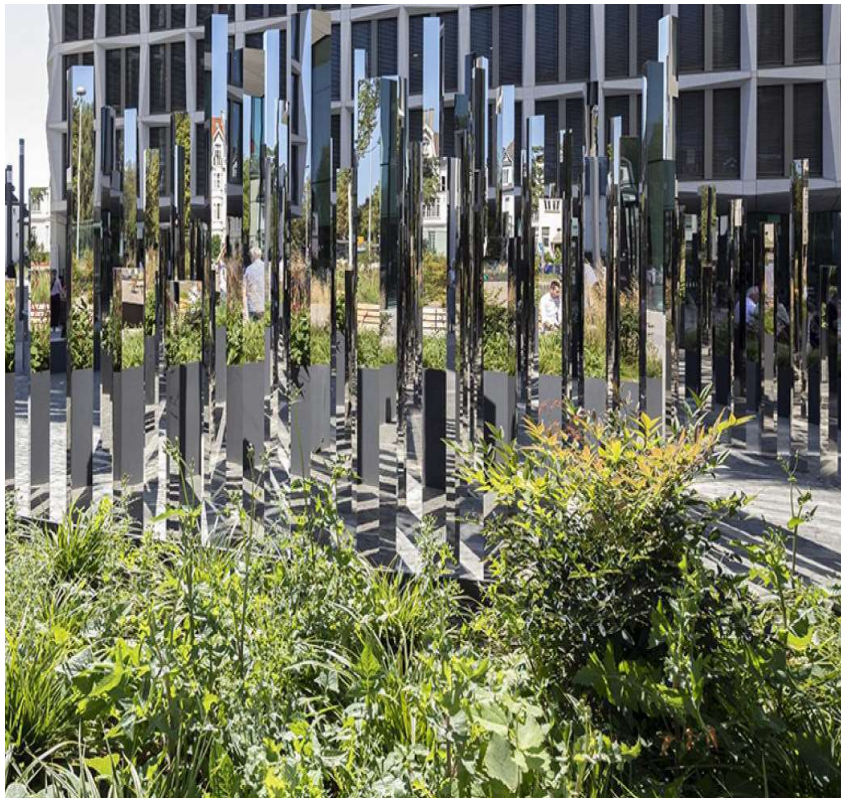
BOULDER MOUND

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - STRUCTURES

NATURAL BRANCH TUNNELS

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - COLUMNS

COLOR FIELD POLES



REFLECTIVE STAINLESS STEEL COLUMNS

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - WALKWAY

STUMP WALK

PLANK WALK

BOULDER WALK

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - SEATS

CUSTOM LOG BENCH

LOG BENCH

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - FENCES

8 FEET TALL FENCE

4 FEET TALL FENCE

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - WOOD MATERIALS FOR REUSE

OAK BRANCHES

COAST LIVE OAK STUMP

*** MATERIALS SALVAGED FROM COAST LIVE OAK IN ATHERTON CITY HALL PLAZA

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - PERSPECTIVE IMAGES

WILLOW HUT

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - PERSPECTIVE IMAGES

BOULDER PLAY

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - PERSPECTIVE IMAGES

TUNNEL VIEW

CHILDREN'S GARDEN - PERSPECTIVE IMAGES

TREE HOUSE VIEW