

Contested mini forest in Baguio to be turned into park

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TREE SANCTUARY This tree park at the Baguio Convention Center compound will be preserved and improved through a city government-backed greening project. —EV ESPIRITU

BAGUIO CITY, Benguet, Philippines — A 1-hectare woodland, which the city government has tried to protect from developers, will now be turned into a tree park, complete with elevated walkways and manicured greenery.

During the regular executive-legislative meeting on Monday, Mayor Benjamin Magalong presented a set of plans for walkways around the pine tree area nestled between the Supreme Court compound, the University of the Philippines (UP) Baguio campus, the Baguio Convention Center and a big shopping mall.

Magalong reasserted the city government's position that it would not allow the loss of more than 500 pine trees and 20 agoho trees, which were planted by students in the 1970s before the area was segregated as part of the Baguio Convention Center during martial law.

Protests

The government put up the convention center to host the 1978 world chess match between grand masters Anatoly Karpov and Viktor Korchnoi. The center and its compound have been administered by the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) until Baguio acquired the building in 2012.

GSIS offered the property for a condominium project but it abandoned the plan following protests by civic groups and schoolchildren who called it their “tree park.”

GSIS initially rejected Baguio’s offer to buy the pine-covered lot.

But the GSIS board recently agreed to study a City Hall-backed, P10-million project that would incorporate new gardens, a walkway through and around the trees, and even a bike lane at the tree park, Magalong said.

Half of the trees there, however, would need treatment. UP Baguio experts said many trees were infested with pests and soiled by people who had been using the forest patch as their toilet.

Regreening

The tree park is part of the city government’s comprehensive plan to regreen Baguio, Magalong said. He directed the city environment office to put up nurseries to grow 200,000 tree saplings to be donated by a mall.

He said new pine trees would also be planted in clusters, subscribing to latest scientific data that trees grown together tend to share chemicals and nutrients using the fungal bacteria found in plant roots. —*Vincent Cabrera*

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