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The Rio Salado Habitat Restoration project received Valley Forward's President's Award at the organization's 26th annual Environmental Excellence Awards.

Rio Salado project takes Valley Forward's top prize

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For so long, the Phoenix part of the Salt River was dry, its banks littered and surrounding area inhospitable. Now, Valley Forward has recognized the strip from 19th Avenue to 24th Street, called the Rio Salado Habitat Restoration project, as its top environmental project of the year.

Being honored with the President's Award during the group's 26th annual Environmental Excellence Awards is significant for redevelopment in the area, said Bill Smith, a local entrepreneur and board chairman of the Greater Phoenix Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"This (honor) will help jump-start an economically depressed area," Smith said. "It will bring prominence to the area and help show the beauty of the area."

Smith, who co-owns Stoudemire's restaurant and Montera's at WestWorld, said he long has wanted to create a tourism location from Seventh to 16th streets, mingling the Mexican and Native American influences in the area. Still working with the city and other businessmen on the idea, although it's on the back burner, Smith said the area "really is one of the best underdeveloped parcels in the city."

The Valley Forward Association works to bring together business and civic leaders to discuss regional issues and promote cooperative efforts to improve the Valley's environment and livability.

Valley Forward and Salt River Project honored 37 projects in 22 categories from the 122 entries submitted by Valley businesses, government agencies and nonprofit organizations at an Oct. 13 event.

Its annual Environmental Excellence Awards are considered the "Academy Awards" of the environmental community. One project per category is presented with the Crescordia Award, named for a Greek term meaning "to grow in harmony."

Rio Salado also took two first-place Crescordia Awards in the Open Space & Connectivity (parks) and Environmental Stewardship (the SRP Award) categories.

The 595-acre project includes walls, pedestrian bridges, path curbing and waterfalls made from recycled concrete pieces found in the river. Valley Forward reported that the National Audubon Society will locate its nature center in the river corridor, and the city of Phoenix plans to use the project as a giant outdoor laboratory with areas designated for classrooms.

Other first-place Crescordia award winners included:

- Mesa's Evergreen Historic District Infill Gem in the Evergreen Historic District in Mesa. Green building principles were used throughout construction.

- Lon's at the Hermosa Inn in the town of Paradise Valley.

- Desert Botanical Garden Facilities.

- North Tempe Multi-Generational Center, which includes a 700-foot-long metaphorical river emanating from a mountain source, alluding to man-made interventions along the Salt River.

- Interdisciplinary Science & Technology Building 3 at Arizona State University Polytechnic campus in East Mesa.

- Arizona State University Foundation Building incorporating several new buildings on a 6-acre site and designed for LEED certification.

- CAP Basin Sports Complex, once a 70-acre dusty parcel of land and a one-week-a-year parking lot during Scottsdale's FBR Open Golf Tournament, and now a 10-field soccer/team sports complex.

- Lost Dog Wash Trailhead — McDowell Sonoran Preserve.

- Fragmented Landscape, artwork screens which change from day to night at the Mesa Arts Center.

- B20 Bio-diesel Alternative Fuel Program in Maricopa County.

- Beaulieu Residence, the result of the Beaulieu family's four-year worldwide quest on green building and desert architecture for the custom Scottsdale.

- Nuestro Bello Desierto — Our Beautiful Desert, a project to educate people who predominantly speak Spanish on how to embrace and care for the desert.

- A.K.A. Green Environmental Building Center hands-on demonstration and education center for homeowners, architects, developers and students.

- Arizona State Envirothon competition for students.

- East Valley Water Forum, originally convened in 2001 as a small group of municipal water providers to address common water resources issues creating competition and opportunity.

- El Rio Watercourse Master Plan, one of the state's largest watersheds at more than 40,000-square miles in the Gila River drainage area.

For a complete list of winners and descriptions of the projects go to www.valleyforward.org.