

New park gets back to nature

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By Robert Cadwallade

If your idea of a city park includes playground equipment and ball fields, then the new 80-acre Elmer W. Oliver Nature Park on Matlock Road might appear incomplete when it opens next month.

In fact, it may be difficult to see the park for all the trees.

Oliver Park is the first of its kind in Mansfield – a truly natural park with little evidence of human encroachment. Its key feature is a brown, crushed-granite trail that winds along heavily wooded hills and sun-blanketed wildflower fields and sweeps by a pair of ponds that will be stocked for fishing.

It does have gravel parking at the entrance along with a stone-and-wood-walled restroom building, by far the largest structure in this phase, the first of three. The trail also leads to a 100-foot wood-plank bridge that spans Walnut Creek, an amphitheater with logs and large rocks for seating, and two observation decks that jut out over steep sections of creek banks.

And, deeper into the wilderness, beyond the reach of water and sewer lines, sits a small, two-seater composting restroom with hand sanitizer.

“This park is not for speed activities,” city park planner Hillary Bueker said last week at the park, where bulldozers were smoothing out a parking area. “Here you slow down and appreciate the nature that surrounds you.”

The grand opening of this \$3 million first phase of Oliver Park, 1650 Matlock Road, is Jan. 25, on schedule and on budget, officials said. The daylong event tentatively includes tours, craft-making and live animal presentations – including owls and reptiles - - said Sam Kieschnick, the city’s new nature education specialist, or naturalist.

The second phase, also \$3 million, will extend the 12-foot-wide, concrete trail of the Walnut Creek Linear Park through Oliver Park and eastward about 2.7 miles to Joe Pool Lake. Design is set to begin next year and construction in 2015.

The \$7 million third phase will add two buildings to the park – a roughly 8,000-square-foot nature education center with space for an office, exhibits and small meetings or receptions, and a 2,000-square-foot learning lab designed as a classroom with

microscopes and equipment for experiments. Those projects will come online in the next four or five years, Bueker said.

When the entire Oliver Park project is completed, the city will have about 800 acres of parkland, including 600 acres of developed parks. It will be the city's sixth community park and 14th overall, a number that includes small sports fields and neighborhood parks.

Oliver Park will join the rare company of nature-focused parks in this area, which include the Southwest Nature Preserve in Arlington, the Dogwood Canyon Audubon Center in Cedar Hill and the Cedar Hill State Park.

The city named Oliver Park in honor of the family patriarch, who bought property along Matlock Road, including the Oliver Park site, more than a half century ago. In 2004, his daughter and son-in-law sold 80 acres to the Mansfield Park Facilities Development Corp., which is funding the development from half-cent sales tax revenues.

The family wanted the property to remain as natural as possible, and park officials believe they have achieved that.

"Basically, it's going to be a nature walk," said Kieschnick, said whose duties would include arranging tours and school field trips. "We will stop at different points and talk about different natural things. The big deal about this park is we're going to be treating it as an outdoor classroom."

Riding in a golf cart-like utility vehicle last week, park superintendent Toby Fojtik paused at a bright green field that he said would be awash in bluebonnets in the spring. "We didn't plan to do anything here. We mowed it and they just came up," he said, referring to last spring's bluebonnets. The field also will be spattered with Indian paintbrush and black-eyed Susan wildflowers.

In addition to the trails – which are soft and not for biking – the city has built a 6-foot-wide boardwalk that winds for 600 feet through a tree-lined field, marking a 100-year flood plain. Kieschnick plans to use the wooden path as a walking classroom to talk about flood levels and the large and microscopic inhabitants of the "pocket prairie," a term Kieschnick prefers to "field."

Another point of interest, Kieschnick said, is the geology of the creek and lower-lying areas, which are in the Woodbine Formation dating back 95 million years to the Cretaceous Period. It's the same formation where the remains of dinosaurs and ancient

crocodiles and sharks have been excavated at the renowned Arlington Archosaur Site in far north Arlington.

There will be no shortage of things to do, especially for the brain, promised Shelly Lanners, the city's director of community services, which includes parks.

"This is a passive park, in that it's about education and learning, connecting with nature," Lanners said. "We'll be exploring the ecosystems out there, the plant life and wildlife, and certainly the hydrology of the creek."

Kieschnick said the park's mission is summed up succinctly in what he called its slogan – "Educate, Appreciate and Preserve."

"Each word leads to the next," he said. "When you learn about something, you start to appreciate something. And when you appreciate something, you want to protect it." So, he added, "Don't bring your Frisbee -- bring a bug net."