

New park step closer to reality

Posted Saturday, Dec. 31, 2011

The newest gem in the city's park system came closer to being set last month.

On Dec. 12, the City Council approved \$267,870 for construction documents for Phase I of the Mansfield Community Park, an 80-acre chunk of land along Matlock Road that the city plans to keep as native as possible.

"It's really a jewel in the Metroplex," said city park planner Hilary Bueker. "It's a piece of DFW that has been untouched."

And the city intends to keep it that way.

"When we purchased the property one of the requirements was that this would not be an athletic park," said Shelly Lanners, the city's director of community services. "Mr. and Mrs. Williams knew about all the wildlife. They wanted everyone to see what they have seen for years. They thought this facility should be more of a nature park, and they were right. While I love baseball and soccer, I don't know that we'll find another piece of property in the city limits that will provide the things this park will provide."

In 2004, Marianne and Kelly Williams Sr. sold their 60-acre farm to the city for \$1 million with the stipulation that the land be used as a park and kept in its natural state. The couple, who raised their children in Houston, bought the property in 1960 and used the land and converted log cabin as a vacation getaway. An additional 20 acres was donated by surrounding homeowners associations. The property includes two ponds, a section of Walnut Creek, rolling hills, an old windmill, an abandoned homesite, a pair of wells, gulleys and pasture.

"Portions of this pasture look like it did in the 1900s," said park superintendent Toby Fojtik, who believes there are native wildflowers lying dormant under some of the more invasive plants.

"It's going to be a key component in our park system," Lanners said. "It's unique. There are things that already exist in this park that don't exist in any other park, wildlife, plants. We don't have to create, just have to provide a space for you to view it."

Phase I of the new park, designed by Dunaway Associates of Fort Worth, doesn't change any of the property's natural resources, just allows visitors access, including 12-foot-wide concrete trails, a bridge over the creek with an observation platform, outdoor classrooms, a parking lot and restrooms.

"I really hope this cannot only provide learning about this site, but about early Mansfield history and culture," Bueker said. "The outdoor classrooms will be geology, forest, hydrology and ecotone classrooms."

The area, which has an assortment of native plants, shrubs and trees, also has a variety of wildlife, Fojtik said, including red fox, rabbits, skunks, bobcats, beaver, opossums and armadillos.

"This will be an excellent birding opportunity," Fojtik said. "It will be fun for my staff to feed the bird feeders and go to the bird blinds."

The cost for the first phase is expected to run about \$2.9 million, Lanners said. Construction could start in January 2013 with the park opening a year later, she said.

Future phases will include an indoor nature center, treehouse learning lab, a greenbelt connection and more outdoor classrooms, Lanners said.

"We want to build in phases so that we'll be able to bite it off in chunks," she said. "A lot of it is due to funding, not just for construction but for the staff to maintain that facility."

The city is looking at different ways to fund the park, including grants, loans and funds from the Mansfield Park Facilities Development Corp., Lanners said.

Like everyone else, Lanners and the park administrators want the new park open as soon as possible, but "we really want to get it right," Bueker said.

"I think it will be a new type of park for Mansfield," she said. "It will really interest people who don't have an opportunity to get out and study nature. Everybody gets to utilize this park. No matter your age or ability, it gives you a piece of nature that we forget about living in the city."

The new park could be a whole new experience for some, Fojtik said.

"For some people the only impression they have of nature is what they see in Town and Rose Park and along the (linear) trail," he said.