'Central Park' ready to be enjoyed



GWINN DAVIS / Staff

This bridge, which opened Thursday, connects an area behind the former Greenville Braves stadium with property on the west side of the Reedy River.

Lake Conestee Nature Park 'a great story of recovery'

Hidden 'jewel' is county's largest park and will top more than 450 acres

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Tucked behind the former Greenville Braves stadium on Mauldin Road sits the main entrance to the largest park in Greenville County. At more than 400 acres, Lake Conestee Nature Park has wowed those who've walked its trails, but remained hidden to the majority of county residents just waking to its potential.

Now, with a new main entrance on Mauldin Road and a 215-foot, $650,000 pedestrian bridge that opened Thursday, the nature park has a link to communities on each side of the Reedy River to help complete its transformation from a forgotten Environmental Protection Agency

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KIM SUMMERS / Staff

PARK

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"brownfield" site to what some are calling Greenville County's "Central Park."

The bridge will connect the 31-acre stadium property and an additional 40 acres of park property with 350 acres on the west side of the river.

"People have started to discover the park," said Jeff Beacham, executive director of the Conestee Foundation, which has overseen development of the nature park. "It's taken some time."

Thursday also marked the opening of one mile of new trails near the park's Mauldin Road entrance on the east side of the Reedy River closest to Interstate 85 and on the outskirts of Mauldin city limits.

"We expect it to explode with activity," Beacham said.

Hikers, bikers and joggers are just now starting to discover the park's trail system, which opened in October 2006. Some walked dogs across the bridge or stared at the rippling Reedy in the sunlight Thursday on the bridge that Greenville County Councilwoman Liz Seman called the "crown jewel of our own little Central Park here in Greenville County."

The bridge and new trails are just the beginning of the Conestee Foundation's plans for the main entrance, Beacham said.

Plans are under way to renovate Greenville Municipal Stadium and build four ballfields to turn the Greenville city-owned site into a recreation complex to draw tournaments here, Beacham said. Greenville has leased the stadium long-term to the Greenville County Recreation District, which also plans to build a playground and picnic shelter near the park's new entrance, he said.

Nearby, the Conestee Foundation plans to build a nature center on the eastern bank of Lake Conestee.

The foundation partnered with the Greenville County Recreation District and numerous other organizations to plan, fund and build the park. Recreation district board member John Arrowood said the park would be a "model" to the entire Southeast be-

cause it ties multiple recreation components together in one massive park.

"This is going to be one of our largest projects," he said. "It's going to end up being over 450 acres."

Lake Conestee Nature Park now offers three miles of paved trails, 2.1 miles of natural surface trails, two large observation decks overlooking wetlands and several boardwalks crossing wetlands.

Eventually the park will serve as the southern endpoint to the Swamp Rabbit Greenway Trail that will stretch 17 miles from Travelers Rest, connecting northern and southern Greenville County.

Within the next year construction should start on a five-mile trail that will hitch Conestee Park to the Swamp Rabbit Trail near I-85. That trail will follow the Reedy River through property owned by ReWa, the former Western Carolina Regional Sewer Authority, Beacham said.

Once a 130-acre lake held in place by a 115-year-old dam near the former Conestee Mill, 200 years worth of chemicals, trash and sediment filled the lake to its current 20-acre size, he said.

"The Industrial Revolution is buried below the forest in the lake," Beacham said. "This was a forgotten place and in terms of environmental stewardship our goal was to make sure that it was safe for the public, and it is."

What's left of the lake still serves a purpose as storm-water collection for the city of Greenville, Beacham said. After heavy rains, what is one day a dry forest fills chest-high with water before it dissipates.

That's all part of the lake's history and purpose, one that the Conestee Foundation wants to share with the public through the park.

"It's a great story of recovery," Beacham said.

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