

Conestee's Phase I trail system opens

BY MELISSA BLANTON
staff writer

The Lake Conestee Nature Park is being called Greenville's Central Park.

And last weekend, 2.3 miles of its trails opened to the public, offering a glimpse of what's to come for the 300-acre nature reserve.

It's an eight-minute drive from downtown, but it feels more like 200 miles, said Doug Stevens, chairman of the Conestee Foundation.

Until 30 years ago, the area located between Donaldson Center and the former Braves stadium was a well-kept secret.

"I didn't even know where Conestee was," said Stevens.

The community had "conveniently forgotten" the lake existed, said Dana Leavitt, land trust director at Upstate Forever. Development flourished around the spot along the Interstate 385 corridor, but concerns over liability due to contamination left the area untouched.

The lake was formed by a dam built in the early 1800s. For decades, it served as a dumping ground for all things toxic. Lead, paint and the byproducts of coal plants flowed down the Reedy River from the industry once located along its banks.

In 1999, the Conestee Foundation was formed with plans to purchase and convert the 145-acre lake property. Environmental regulations passed in the 1970s slowed the flow, and nature began its own healing process.

Sediment slowly built up along the lakebed, burying what environmentalists call "legacy contaminants."

"It emerged in just a gorgeous network of beaver ponds and sloughs," said Leavitt.

The foundation poured about \$700,000 into testing and studies. But a solid foundation was necessary if a park was ever to be built on the land, said Leavitt.

Last summer, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control approved the land for use in passive recreation.

In addition to the hiking trails, volunteers have constructed a series of board-



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WALK IN THE PARK: Marie, Colton, Madi and Arnold Sutter of Simpsonville check out the new trails during last weekend's opening day.

walks and a large observation deck that juts out over wetlands. It's a spot where the ducks and beavers share their habitat with the occasional roar of corporate jets departing from Donaldson Center.

And Phase I is just the beginning of some much bigger plans, said Stevens.

"You have to start somewhere," he said. "So for the last year we've been laying the trails."

The foundation closed on what was formerly known as the Henderson Farm last week. The area offers direct access to the lake and may eventually be used for an educational facility as well as the reserve's trailhead.

There will eventually be two-to-three times the current number of available trails, said Jeffery Beacham, executive director of the Conestee Foundation.

"The fully developed park will very likely be 600 acres or more."

That's about the size of Furman University's campus.

There are hopes that the new trails will help alleviate some of the strain on the county's parks as well as Falls Park. But it will be another five years before the park has all the amenities offered by its counterparts, said Beacham.

But it all depends on finding funding sources, said Stevens.

Next on the foundation's to-do list is completion of the master plan, said Beacham. That will require gathering support from the community and property owners around the reserve. And this winter work will begin on a paved trail that connects the existing trailhead with the Henderson Farm property.

Eventually, the foundation hopes to hand over day-to-day control of the park to another entity.

"This will provide a huge venue for people to come to in urban Greenville County," said Beacham.

Contact Melissa Blanton at 679-1242 or mblanton@greenvillejournal.com.