

Lake Conestee park gift could give mill area new nature

Residents hope Community Foundation funds help neighborhood

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If she cranes her neck, Kathryn Sarles can just spot Lake Conestee from the front porch of her home, a hundred yards or so from the shuttered Conestee Mills.

But this summer, Sarles might become much more familiar with the area as trails are completed and the Lake Conestee Nature Park opens to the public.

"I think it would be cool to have a place other than sidewalks to go for walks," Sarles said Tuesday morning. "I took my dogs to Cleveland Park a couple of times, but it's a little far. But if (a park is) over here, we'll be all over it."

The Lake Conestee Nature Park received a shot in the arm Tuesday morning when the Community Foundation of Greenville announced it would give \$500,000 to the Conestee Foundation, money that will go toward the purchase of additional property for the nature park.

The Lake Conestee Nature Park currently comprises about 260 acres, including 150 acres of wetlands and 1.5 miles of the Reedy River, which feeds Lake Conestee. Eventually, the park could be as large as 800 acres, or roughly the size of Central Park in New York.

For that kind of growth, however, the Conestee Foundation will need to raise additional money to go with the Community Foundation's \$500,000 gift.

"The Community Foundation's gift is a great stimulus for us to go to other organizations to see if we can leverage that gift and see if we can get other contributions," said Dana H. Leavitt, a member of the Conestee Foundation board.

"If we're successful, then we'll be able to acquire properties that will allow us some other entranceways into the park."

The nature park could be a boon for Conestee, according to the Rev. S.C. Cureton, whose church, Reedy River Missionary Baptist, is less than a mile from the old mill.

"I remember years ago, when Conestee was in blossom," Cureton said. "Probably this will bring back some of the positive things in the neighborhood."

"Now it's kind of run down because they don't have any work to amount to anything. I remember a time when everybody who lived in Conestee had a job at Conestee Mills. In all probability, this will create more jobs, and that will be a positive for the community."

In announcing the money, Community Foundation of Greenville President Bob Morris echoed Cureton's thoughts.

"The Community Foundation hopes the transformation of Lake Conestee and the surrounding area will prove to be as dramatic as Falls Park in the West End," Morris said.

The nature park is currently bounded to the west by Fork Shoals Road, to the east by the Reedy River, to the south by Conestee Road and to the north by Henderson Avenue. The properties the Conestee Foundation wants to purchase would make the lake itself more accessible, according to Leavitt.

Preserving the lake and the wetlands is also important from an environmental standpoint. The Reedy River flows south from Greenville, through Lake Conestee and eventually on to Greenwood.

"This remarkable wildlife wonderland on the Reedy River functions as the kidneys of the Reedy River, absorbing a lot of the waters that come through the upper part of the county and purifying those and taming those waters as they come down from Greenville toward Greenwood," Leavitt said.

Leavitt said the Conestee Foundation has been in touch with landowners in the Lake Conestee area, but declined to discuss specific parcels the foundation might want to purchase.

The next step in the process, according to Leavitt, is to create a master plan to guide development of the Lake Conestee Nature Park.

"As part of the master plan, we need to go to the larger community, and our partners, the city the county, and understand from the citizens across the community, what are the things that should be included for this park," Leavitt said.