



Willow Waterhole an oasis of trails – and movie screen

Willow Waterhole's trails, ponds, movie screen and more greet neighborhood families

By Rebecca Hennes | HoustonChronicle.com |
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Just 20 minutes south of the bumper-to-bumper traffic and commercial frenzy of the Galleria area lies a 291-acre peaceful oasis unknown to most Houstonians, even some nearby residents.

“We live five minutes away, and we didn’t even know this was here,” Patty Daza said. “I’m so overwhelmed and so excited, especially for the kids.”

Daza brought her children to Willow Waterhole Conservation Reserve recently for a free movie, complete with hot popcorn.

As they waited for the sun to set, children dressed as ladybugs, storm troopers and cowgirls for the pre-Halloween event ran in the fields while older kids tossed a football or kicked around a soccer ball.

Another free movie this weekend will draw more families to the parkland surrounding a series of stormwater-detention basins near South Post Oak and South Main.

“This is a tremendous gift,” said Howard Sacks, a past president of the Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy. “When people come out here, I think they’re going to be happily surprised at how it makes them feel and just how beautifully done the project is.”

Conservancy members hope to gain signature-park status for Willow Waterhole, home to grassy fields, young trees and walking trails that circle ponds and cross foot bridges.

“This will be as big a regional destination as Memorial and Hermann,” Sacks said, referring to two of the city’s other signature parks. “Its major feature is something that none of these other parks have, and that is water, water and more water.”

Birders’ paradise

As part of Project Brays, a flood-prevention effort by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Harris County Flood Control District, Willow Waterhole already includes four stormwater-detention basins, with plans for two more. The \$70 million series of wet-bottom detention ponds will ultimately hold 600 million gallons of water and protect the Texas Medical Center and neighborhoods bordering Brays Bayou from flooding.

The land surrounding the ponds is being developed for recreational use and wildlife preservation. Work began in 2004 with a \$750,000 grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. A nearly \$400,000 federal grant in 2012 is being used for habitat restoration, signs, parking lots and educational research.

The park is expected to be completed in 2015. But visitors already can walk the trails, have picnics at tables and gazebos, walk their dogs down the bayou or just enjoy the scenery. As the home to 190 species of birds, the park has become a favorite spot for bird-watchers.

“When you’ve got water, you’ve got birds,” Sacks said. “This is the largest birding site in the fourth-largest city in the nation.”

Plans call for a multi-use pier on one of the ponds, which would be stocked with fish. The ponds are large enough for kayaking, too.

“It’s a tranquil oasis of green space that makes you feel like you’re an hour out of town when in fact you’re close to a lot of major metro points,” Sacks said.

Pavilion in the works

Movie screenings are just one way the conservancy plans to increase awareness of the park. The group holds an annual Fun Run and Walk fundraiser, and its second-annual free-admission music festival drew more than 1,500 people in April.



Some of the entertainers who played the International Festival this spring “were here the next day, and whoever came saw them for free,” said Clint Rusk, the conservancy’s Events Committee chair.

A much bigger project is a future outdoor pavilion that would seat 5,000 on a 3-acre lawn and offer 50 free concerts annually. Willow Waterhole was chosen in 2013 to house the nation’s eighth Levitt Pavilion, joining Los Angeles; Memphis, Tenn.; and Arlington, among others.

Levitt Pavilions is a national nonprofit organization that advocates revitalizing communities and public spaces through music. Funds are being raised for the \$5 million project, which Sacks hopes will open by 2018.

“The Levitt is a dream come true for Houston,” said Sacks, chairman of the Friends of Levitt Pavilion Houston. “There is every opportunity for every kind of entertainment to use the pavilion.”

Josh Howell brought his family to the pre-Halloween movie screening, which featured rides on a miniature train brought in for the occasion.

“The kids love the train and the snowballs, and it’s close to our house, so we love that,” Howell said. “It’s nice to support our local parks and support our neighborhood.”

Information: www.willowwaterhole.org
www.levittpavillions.org/houston