

Old space, new face

City-Brooks Park re-opens with grand flourish

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When Baton Rouge city officials started planning a large city park in 1922, a major consideration was that it would provide a picnic and party place for local residents who did not own automobiles. Today, people can drive there from miles away to enjoy this jewel of a park. It's a beloved space that has served generations, and it's got a new face.

The grand re-opening of City-Brooks Community Park takes place tomorrow, Saturday, May 31. The Recreation and Park Commission of East Baton Rouge Parish (BREC) plans a full day of activities, including games, food, music and fun. Residents, parents, and children of all ages are encouraged to attend. See:

<http://www.brec.org/index.cfm?md=pagebuilder&tmp=home&cpid=2390&adminkey=1208878332573&CFID=18829&CFTOKEN=40263822>

BREC Superintendent Bill Palmer said the park's improvements were outlined in the City Park master plan, which was developed with extensive public input. Public meetings were held to get people's opinions of existing facilities and what the park should be. "It's all part of our 'Imagine Your Parks' strategic plan which started in 2003," said Palmer.

City Park's design development was led by Carol R. Johnson Associates, Inc. The master plan was completed by Henslee-Cox Landscape Architects. Construction costs totaled roughly \$6.58 million, including \$5.56 million for park improvements and \$1.02 million to the nine-hole public golf course.

"First of all, City Park is a very historic park," said Palmer. "It dates from the 1920s. There was a carousel, and a swimming pool was behind the bath house and pavilion in the 1930s, '40s and '50s."

Articles in the State-Times and Morning Advocate archives trace the park's history. Land that became the park was donated by the city to LSU in 1872 for use as an experimental farm. Later, the land was transferred back to the city for use as a park.

In 1927, a merry-go-around and carousel pavilion was installed in the park by B.M. Murphy, who operated similar pavilions in New Orleans City Park and Audubon Park. In 1928, the opening dedication of a City Park swimming pool included bathing beauty contests for girls of all ages in various categories. The Morning Advocate reported that in the under 7 group "little Miss Betty Monian, aged 4, won first place." Madelein Rhodes, "an unusual and lovely type..." was first place in the older girls group.

In the 1930s, City Park tripled in size, the result of a major expansion project using Emergency Relief Administration and Works Progress Administration labor. The monumental project included the extension of the lake by clearing Perkins Swamp and building a road around the lake.

During the 1930s, the park also contained a small zoo. Animals included foxes, a bald eagle, monkeys, rabbits, parrots and ducks. In 1937, the zoo became the home of "Hinky Dinky," Catholic High School's 300-pound bear mascot.

Palmer said the park has always served a diverse number of neighborhoods, including the Garden District, City Park area and Old South Baton Rouge, and as a gateway into the LSU area. The new design takes into consideration the site's history and natural features. Facilities have been updated according to current needs and improve the connection between City Park and neighboring Brooks Park.

Named after the Rev. W.K. Brooks, former president of the United Negro Recreation Association, Brooks Park was founded in 1953. Under an agreement with the East Baton Rouge Parish School System, McKinley Middle School students use Brooks Park for physical education classes during school hours while the community can enjoy BREC recreation programs in the school gym after hours. A new pedestrian and biking trail ties the two area together.

“We are pulling in the past and looking into the future,” said Palmer.

Improvements made to City Park include: Capitol One Tennis Center, Raising Cane's Dog Park, outdoor terraces, golf course rehabilitation, new play areas, new walking trails and bike paths, informal gardens, a labyrinth, picnic areas, outdoor multi-use areas, outdoor lighting, site furnishings, new identity and way-finding signing.

Ted Jack, director of planning and engineering, and Reed Richard, assistant director and project manager, have been deeply involved with the daily work of the park's redesign.

Jack said, “Part of the re-design is to get people out to be more active. It's why we've been building walking paths. We're able to get the paths close enough to people's neighborhoods that they become a part of daily life.”

Many of the new features incorporate a part of the past. Columns from the old picnic hill pavilion — and formerly from an 1800s farmers market — now serve as the base for lighting at the gateway area and along the length of the promenade. The metal fixture top is in the shape of a sugar kettle and, at night, casts light on the promenade.

Originally designed by Tom Bendelow in the 1920s, the golf course has been renovated but respects Bendelow's concepts. The greens have been irrigated and the clubhouse renovated.

Behind the Art Gallery, there's an interactive water fountain that pays homage to the old carousel. Nozzles are in a circular fashion and the paving features engraved patterns of animals and plants from City Park and Louisiana.

“There also will be interpretive plaques throughout that will tell the history and facts of the park,” said Reed.

Park improvements were made possible through the support of BREC Foundation, Capital One Bank, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System, Entergy Charitable Foundation, Friends of City Park, Foundation for Historical Louisiana, Irene W. And C.B. Pennington Foundation, the Knock Knock Children's Museum, Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers Restaurants, Rivervie Holdings, the U.S. Tennis Association and Volunteers of the Baton Rouge Labyrinth Project.

As in the days of City Park's early years, nearby residents can stroll over for the re-opening. For others, the drive is not too far, but going the distance will be worth the effort.