

Greenville's 'Central Park'

Greenville News Oct 10, 2006 6C

Polluted pond morphing into Lake Conestee Nature Park

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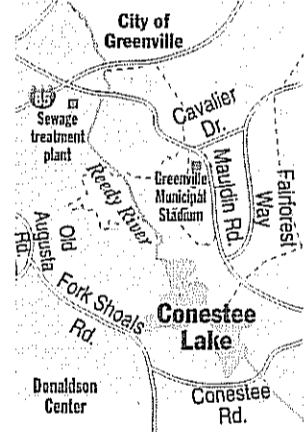
Less than a decade ago, Lake Conestee was considered a toxic pool of goop better left forgotten.

For nearly two centuries, Greenville's textile mills, residents and those from points north of the former 145-acre lake dumped waste in the Reedy River. Chemicals, toxins and trash meandered downstream until it collected behind one of a series of dams that originally created the lake.

The last dam was built in the late 1800s, and Jeffery Beacham, executive director of the Conestee Foundation, said the sludge it trapped is probably better left alone.

"About 80-90 percent of the original lake is filled in and it has become a bottomland hardwood forest," Beacham said. "From an environmental standpoint, the Industrial Revolution is sitting in the sediment at the bottom of the lake."

Sitting directly south of Greenville's former city landfill, and within a mile of



YOU CAN GO

■ A grand opening celebration of the Lake Conestee Nature Park and Phase I of the trail system at the park is Oct. 28 from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Trail maps will be available at the trail kiosk off the Henderson Avenue parking lot. The trail is near the Village of Conestee and can be accessed by taking Fork Shoals Road to Henderson Avenue.

Trails are well marked. Those who are going to hike should wear long pants and sturdy walking shoes and bring water.



Photos by HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Seeing into the future: Anne Holleman gazes out on the lake at Lake Conestee Nature Park while participating in a tour of the area.

Western Carolina Sewer Authority's Mauldin Road waste treatment plant, the entire area seems as if it would be better off remaining a no man's land than the planned "Central Park" of Greenville.

But that's exactly what's in the planning stages, Beacham said.

"New York's Central Park is just about 800 acres," he said. "And this would be too."

Later this month, the Lake Conestee Nature Park will expand its holdings to 300 acres and have its grand opening celebration, which includes showing off a 2.3-mile na-

ture trail that encircles part of the lake, crosses boardwalks over wetlands and delves through thick woodlands.

The grand plan is to make the park the southern hub of the planned Reedy River Greenway, the trail that would stretch from Travelers Rest south to Mauldin, following former railroad lines and meandering alongside the Reedy River. From that main line would be a vast assortment of spur trails to neighborhoods, schools and other parks.

Still in the planning stages, the possible uses for the park run the gamut

from the likely to the fantastic.

Beacham mentions an environmental education center rivaling Roper Mountain Science Center, and outdoor recreational activities from hiking, biking and paddling, to a dog park, a par-3 golf course, a wildlife rehabilitation center and Frisbee golf.

Other lands could be added. Greenville Municipal Stadium, for example, is for sale and is adjacent to the park site. Beacham said it could become recreation fields, as the thirst for youth soccer fields and baseball diamonds remains unquenched.

"This could be a city park, a county park, a combina-

tion city-county effort, or another state park," he said.

But now in its infancy, the park, crossed with streams and dotted with beaver ponds, is a haven for a leisurely stroll through native flora, for birdwatching and nature viewing, for catch-and-release fishing, a hike with the family dog and other forms of passive recreation.



Dr. Jeffery Beacham, above right and below, executive director of the Conestee Foundation, talks about the Lake Conestee Nature Park while leading a tour Saturday. The park near Municipal Stadium would be about the same size as New York's Central Park, he says — 800 acres.



Susan Lochridge stops to look at a plant while taking a tour of the Lake Conestee Nature Park. The mostly filled-in lake is now a bottomland hardwood forest.

