



A community with vision, pride

New trail connects people, nature

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Managing Editor

On the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River, at the edge of Melvern's city limits, people, river and community spirit intersect.

The river is a historical thoroughfare that served its usefulness before roads were built. By horse, wagon, and on foot, early day travelers used river trails to get to and from towns that grew along the river's banks.

Today, highways have taken over for rivers; most people seldom walk from place to place for long distances. As convenience of modern travel drives our world, the benefits of walking in nature have been left by the trailside.

About a year ago, the city of Melvern embarked on a journey that offers area residents opportunity to enjoy natural areas on the river's bank - one person's idea has paved the route to construction of a trail system. Not only does the project promise to improve the health of those who use the trails, signposts of civic pride and volunteerism have guided and lifted spirits of all who have worked together to build the trails.

As planned, seven miles of river trails will eventually intertwine in a 40-acre area that once was the city's trash dump amid old rock quarries. The area is now covered with heavy overgrowth, but since the project began, volunteers have carved out almost two miles of trails.

Up until a weekend in April, work had been undertaken with a handful of local volunteers. On April 19, over 100 people gathered to work on the trails. Represented were volunteers from Melvern, Osage County, colleges and universities, and others from across the state.

Many of Melvern's special weekend guests were students who traveled to an unfamiliar place to help build a small town's hiking trails. Their reward was becoming a part of a community that was not their own.

A Route Plotted

Although he does not accept credit for success of the trail project, others involved point to rural Melvern resident Douglas Bush as the one who set the town on the path to build the river park.

About 10 years ago, Bush, an environmental scientist with the Kansas Department of Agriculture Division of Water Resources, thought of the idea for trails at the edge of town along the river.

"I went down and wandered through there," Bush said. "I thought this would be a great place to put trails.

"I just liked it there, it's so neat to walk down through, it's a wilderness, there are big trees, and the river is nice and straight and deep through there," he said. "It's a beautiful piece of ground; it was going to waste."

"I thought about it for a long time," he said.

Bush, who lives on and farms his family's farm northeast of Melvern, also saw the river park could be a unique attraction for the town.

He noted only certain towns could have such a feature. "You can't have a riverfront park unless you have a river going by your town," he said.

He first attempted to find and contact the property's landowner, but letters sent went unanswered.

In 2005, "Finally I gave up and sent a letter to the city council," he said. "You think about something and never do it, and finally you just do it."

"I think my idea would be unique for a city the size of Melvern and may help with drawing new residents..." Bush wrote to the council.

The answer he received from Melvern Mayor Adam Burnett surprised him. Burnett told Bush the city already owned the land except for the mineral rights. Bush also learned a grant for such a purpose had already been obtained, but had remained unused.

From that point, local residents were spurred by Bush's idea "and ran with the ball," he said.

The town began plotting

the route toward development of the trail and park that will eventually include hiking, biking, picnicking, and primitive camping opportunities.

Work on the trails did not officially begin until last year, but in the meantime several people worked toward obtaining other grants that have funded the entire project.

By 2006, Melvern Pride member Darrel Schultze notified the city council that an ecosystem grant of \$5,000 a year for two years had been secured through the Kansas Environment Leadership program. In November 2006, a committee formed to develop ideas for the trail, and Melvern's Friends of the Trail group was born. Last fall, Melvern resident Joyce Lacy reported progress was being made on the river trail; a \$5,000 grant had been secured from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and the Kansas Trails Council and Westar Energy had offered assistance with materials and support services. Earlier this year, the project was boosted by funds from the city of Melvern and Lyndon State Bank to match a grant of \$9,250 from the Sunflower Foundation. Additional funding of \$3,000 was received from a K-State Research and Extension program to increase youth fitness.

Burnett, who will claim no credit for the project, said city officials welcomed Bush's idea.

"We thought it'd be a great location for that," the mayor said. "It's another way for community members to hike and get their exercise, or sit and watch the river. It provides nice access to the river, and there are a lot of ways for people to use that area."

Burnett said the city council also agreed with Bush's suggestion that the trail park could not only benefit area residents, but also attract others to Melvern.

"We're always looking at ways to get folks to town," Burnett said. "We hope

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College students, Westar Energy Green Team, and local volunteers construct a bridge across a small tributary of the Marais des Cygnes River along Melvern's hiking and biking trail.

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Melvern's river trail system is the dream of Doug Bush, who worked alongside volunteers to carve the paths amid the city's old trash dump and abandoned quarries.