

Ground broken for greenbelt



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The project involves transforming what has been a back-alley dumping ground along the creek near Our Lady of the Lake University into a linear park that will stretch nearly a mile.



By Vianna Davila - Express-News

As a child growing up on the West Side, Robert Ramirez always was warned to stay away from nearby creeks: They were just too dangerous, adults told him.

And though he lived on one side of a creek and went to school on the other, he obeyed the rules and never went exploring.

Decades later, Ramirez stood alongside those banks he was told not to frequent and saw a very different vision for their future.

"I'll match this part of the Zarzamora and Apache creeks against any other creek and any other part of the river in the county," said Ramirez, co-chairman of the San Antonio River Authority's Westside Creeks Restoration Oversight Committee.

"It's been a hidden jewel," he said.

Ramirez was among those gathered Wednesday afternoon beside Zarzamora Creek, just before it meets Apache Creek, for the groundbreaking of a linear park and revitalization project, spearheaded by the San Antonio Alternative Housing Corp.

"This, to me, is a sanctuary," said Rod Radle, the housing organization's executive director. "It's one that's not utilized."

This might be one of the last places someone would look for wildlife — in the middle of a highly urban area just north of Our Lady of the Lake University, where the creek is hidden among houses, a warehouse and an apartment complex.

But by springtime, this back alley will be transformed into a greenbelt that runs 8/10 mile, from General McMullen to West Commerce Street and Elmendorf Lake.

Six large bridges will span existing drainage areas that run the length of the greenbelt. The park will include two trails: a 6-foot-wide concrete path, for strollers and the wheelchair-bound; and the other, a 4-foot-wide crushed-granite trail for joggers.

Exercise stations also will be included, in addition to benches.

More trees will be planted; and, unlike some city parks, the lights will remain ablaze all night. Parks and Recreation will patrol and maintain the park, Radle said.

The project was paid for with money accumulated from a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone, attached to another San Antonio Alternative Housing initiative, the Rosedale affordable housing development. The river authority also provided finishing funds for the project.

The park is scheduled to open in late March or early April.

Radle and other volunteers already have started clearing out much of the brush and trash from the area. But plastic soda bottles, egg containers and even mattresses still litter the ground.

Despite the trash, the creek already is an impressive expanse, stretching 50 feet across in some places, lush with plant life like rain lilies, its gently flowing waters shaded by large, overhanging trees.

On Wednesday, egrets swooped above the water's surface, behind a tent set up for the groundbreaking. Radle already has spotted a turtle laying eggs in the creek's muddy banks.

“I feel inspired,” said Roberto Rodriguez, secretary of the SARA board and its District 2 representative. “Look at this.”

He raised his arms up and pointed to a large nest in a tree overlooking Zarzamora Creek.

Revitalization of West Side creeks long has been of a dream of Rodriguez, a vision that was, until recently, largely ignored.

The West Side soon may reap the benefits of good timing: last year, the SARA launched its Westside Creeks project, an effort to revitalize the Alazan, Apache, San Pedro and Martinez creeks.

That project still is in the planning stages, but the San Antonio Alternative Housing creek project falls within its boundaries and serves as a good pilot project for future development, said Rudy Farias, SARA water resource and community development manager.

Former Mayor Howard Peak, on hand for the groundbreaking, has championed creation of such hike trails through the Linear Creekway Parks Advisory Board, which he chairs.

Bexar County, in conjunction with the city, also has stepped up efforts to improve nearby Elmendorf Lake and its adjoining park near OLLU.

The time is now, many said Wednesday, to finally make something happen.

“We want a rebirth of the waterways on the West Side so they become a center of community activity,” Bexar County Commissioner Paul Elizondo said.