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Trail mix

Nature Center, library meld efforts

*By Ruth Ingram
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When Clinton Community Nature Center director John Stark talks about getting children off the computer and into the woods, he's serious.

"A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study shows that kids are spending more than seven and a half hours a day in front of a screen of some kind," Stark said. "Numerous other studies show the importance of active, creative play in nature."

A new walking trail encircling the city's Quisenberry Library parking lot will weave back to a detention pond on the library grounds. It will travel through woods to the Nature Center, connecting the library and center and enticing both young and older readers outdoors.

"I have written a children's story book, *Read This Book Outside*, that we just sent to the publisher," Stark said. "It emphasizes the importance of children spending significant amounts of time playing in the woods, like we did when we were kids."

City Public Works crews on Wednesday continued the process of flagging the new trail paths with ribbon, and work to clear them should begin in earnest closer to May, said Public Works director Mike Parker.

"We're ready to go, but we need to wait until the weather is such that we'll have a dry spell to get in there and do the work," said Mayor Rosemary Aultman. "It will be a nice asset to the library and to the community at large."

It's a joint project bringing together Public Works, city engineer Richard Broome, the city Department of Parks and Recreation, the Nature Center and the library. All told, the trail in a wide circle around the parking lot and another loop between land in back of the library and the Nature Center will be about 4,700 feet, Broome said.

The tranquility of the trail from the far side of a pond in back of the library continuing to the Nature Center's northeast corner is being preserved during the work, Parker said.

It's being funded through a \$39,000 grant from the state Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks and bolstered through about \$9,750 in in-kind services from the city, mostly labor, Broome said.

The trail system was originally part of the library's master plan, Parker said. "For budget reasons, it was taken out, but this way, it won't cost the city anything."

The family of Clinton resident Bill Quisenberry donated the land on which the library stands. Quisenberry's late mother, Bea Quisenberry, and father Bill owned and edited *The Clinton News* for many years.

Quisenberry is working hand in hand with city officials to complete the trail, and he's looking forward

to walking on it. "Once it gets under way, it will not take that long," the Olde Towne resident said.

The 6-foot-wide trail into the Nature Center will have a base of slag, or metal shavings, Parker said. And as with other Nature Center trails, no motorized vehicles will be allowed on it.

A boardwalk-style wooden bridge will be constructed by Parks and Recreation staff where the trail connects to the nonprofit Nature Center. The 33-acre center is located just off Clinton's Olde Towne and is open at no charge to the public from sunrise to sundown, seven days a week.

"There's a deer herd that lives in that undeveloped part," Stark said. "The herd probably travels along the railroad right-of-way, and that's the way they make contact with the Natchez Trace."

History and nature buffs walking in the Nature Center find plenty of landmarks, including a section of the original Natchez Trace, an old well, a butterfly garden, an amphitheater and a building for educational programs.

The value of teaching the community about history, wildlife and the ecosystem makes for an excellent pairing with the library, Stark said.

"I don't know of any other situation in the state where you have a public library and a nature center working in tandem," Stark said. "Any time two organizations can meld their efforts for service to citizens, the better quality experience we can provide."

Quisenberry agrees.

"The library has an educational mission, and the Nature Center has an educational mission," he said.

"I see it as a symbiotic relationship where each can feed off the other. We hope people will really take advantage of both facilities."
