

A NEW PLACE TO FROLIC

For at least two decades, parks and neighborhood groups pushed for the construction of a park on the swath of land between Riverside Drive and Barton Springs Road, just across from Auditorium Shores.

Workers are now finishing up the 21-acre, \$7.3 million Town Lake Park, which includes a 35-foot hill, a children's art garden, a decorative pond, an oval-shaped meadow and a granite and concrete plaza with embedded fountain jets for cooling off.

The park is the green centerpiece of the revamped public spaces between Riverside Drive and Barton Springs Road. It sits next to the Palmer Events Center, which opened in 2002, and the Long Center for the Performing Arts, which is rising from the shell of Palmer Auditorium. The city also narrowed Riverside Drive to make it more pedestrian-friendly and better connect Auditorium Shores and the Town Lake hike-and-bike trail to the new park complex.

Together, the projects were conceived as something between a miniature version of Central Park (the meadow will be known as the Great Lawn, the same name as a set of ball fields in New York's famous park) and Washington's Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (minus the Potomac River).

The park design ties into the City of Austin's aim to cultivate a downtown neighborhood that offsets suburban sprawl, said Jason Sowell, a landscape architecture professor at the University of Texas.

"What the city is banking on - density of downtown development - precludes everybody from getting their own lawn, and collectively the parks become that space," Sowell said. The park "starts to position downtown as a destination point for people living in outlying areas. That in turn fuels economic development for downtown businesses."

It's unclear when the park will open to the public; parks officials said workers need a string of rain-free days to finish the pond. They said it should open soon after July 4.

When it opens, the park's supporters say, Austin will have a true central park.

"We have Zilker Park, and it's marvelous, but it doesn't function as a heart-of-the-city central park," said Larry Akers, a member of Austin's Friends of the Parks group. "This is a park that can function as a meeting place for all kinds of events."

The money for the park was raised chiefly through a rental car tax.

The park balances formal landscaping and open space for playing. The meadow will be perfect for "flying a kite or kicking a soccer ball," Assistant Parks Director Stuart Strong said. Parks officials said dogs will be allowed in the park as long they are on a leash.

Plans for the park had been kicked around since at least the mid-1980s, but the idea ran into money or development roadblocks.

In 2003, for example, neighbors fought a proposal by developers to turn the land into stores or lofts. When ground was broken in 2006, the site was dominated by the City Coliseum, a decades-old public building that had hosted everything from livestock shows to concerts. The coliseum and its parking lots were demolished, and Dawson Road, which connected Riverside and Barton Springs, was removed. A baseball field that was once home to the minor league Austin Senators had also been at the site.

SIZE: 21 acres

COST: \$7.3 million

OPENING: Soon after July 4, depending on the weather

SOME FEATURES: 35-foot hill, children's art garden, meadow known as the Great Lawn

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