



NEWS

4200 SMITH SCHOOL ROAD • AUSTIN, TEXAS 78744 • FAX 512-389-4450

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Media Contact: Tom Harvey, (512) 389-4453

June 7, 2004

ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING CENTER TO SERVE URBAN HOUSTON

HOUSTON – Construction has begun on the first phase of a multi-million dollar project to build new student facilities and transform former fish hatchery ponds into a model environmental education center at Sheldon Lake State Park in northwest Houston.

The Sheldon Lake Environmental Learning Center is envisioned as a giant, outdoor classroom where schoolchildren can learn about nature and the environment through hands-on experience. The main audience is inner city young people, few of whom have access to fishing, birding and other typical state park activities.

“The world of nature and the outdoors, the domain of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and its allies, has historically been a rural enterprise,” said Al Henry of Houston, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Commissioner who has become the project’s leading advocate. “But today we have millions of children growing up in an urban world of concrete and steel. With the Sheldon project, we can bring the outdoors into the city and give these children important new chances for learning and growth.”

About 7,500 students already travel each year to Sheldon Lake, a reservoir created in 1942 to provide water for war industries along the ship channel. The site later became a state fish hatchery and then a state park, which today offers youth fishing and other learning activities at 28 former hatchery ponds.

But the proposed project would more than double the volume of students moving through and greatly expand the quality and variety of visitor experiences.

The first phase, funded with about \$5.8 million from various sources, is under construction and set to open this fall. This includes a new 4,600-square-foot Pond Center building with an outdoor pavilion to orient arriving students and for use on rainy days. Also in under construction is a new 15,000-square-foot Pond Plaza of outdoor landscaped areas, including a new observation deck for 80 people—all this is an interpretive gathering and embarkation area for the pond network.

At the heart of the first phase are four new Pond Learning Stations that serve as outdoor aquatic classrooms. The first, Aquatic Lab # 1, is a covered deck in the middle of a pond. Aquatic Lab #2 is an open deck in a different pond on the complex's south side. These "labs" allow students to get into the water to collect pond samples for study under a microscope. The next learning station is the Pond Crossing, a boardwalk that spans an entire pond with a covered deck outdoor classroom in the middle. The fourth station is a new Pond Pavilion shaded trailhead and observation deck in an adjacent wooded area at the far west end of the rows of ponds. Connecting all this is a rebuilt trail system that winds through the ponds, including an accessible bridge for students with disabilities.

Although youth education is the main focus, two other project goals are native habitat restoration and sustainable design. Also this year, scientists and volunteers have been planting native plants to restore wetlands and prairies. Agreements have been struck to secure essential water to sustain the main reservoir. Buildings incorporate "green" design features like solar energy and rainwater collection, not only to save energy and prevent pollution, but also to showcase these concepts for students.

But the afore-mentioned improvements only scratch the surface of what is planned at Sheldon. Backers are seeking approximately \$9.6 million in private donations to complete the second phase, which would include a new \$3.3 million education and visitor center. Plans also call for "tree top" cabins and a camping area for overnight group stays, a dining hall and kitchen, plus more trails, boardwalks and habitat restoration.

The Parks and Wildlife Foundation of Texas, the official nonprofit partner of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, is helping to raise private donations for the project. The Meadows Foundation of Houston is also a major supporter.

To make a donation or learn about donor opportunities, see the foundation Web site (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/admin/infrastructure/capital_campaign/sheldon.phtml) or phone (214) 720-1478.

For more information about Sheldon Lake State Park, including hours, fees and opportunities for school groups and families, see the park Web page (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park/sheldon) or phone (281) 456-2800. Complete information about the Sheldon Lake Environmental Learning Center, including project photos and plans, is also online (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/admin/infrastructure/sheldon_lake).