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New park opens in East Manatee

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It was a moment many in East Manatee had long awaited, the grand opening of a new public park that a land owner envisioned in the late 1990s.

The 180-acre Tom Bennett Park, off State Road 64 and Interstate 75 at Cypress Creek Boulevard, has a children's playground, volleyball area, soccer field, bandstand, picnic area, a one-and-a-half-mile nature trail and a lake with a dock.

At the grand opening ceremony Saturday, residents and officials came out to celebrate.

In what he described as a "Cadillac Tour," former County Commissioner Jon Bruce regaled the crowd with tales of the late Tom Bennett riding over fields in his Cadillac, bumping along, avoiding the cattle, to give a tour of the land he hoped one day the community could enjoy.

In 1996, Bennett approached the county; by 1998, a conceptual plan was completed. Bruce quoted Bennett as saying, "I'm very serious about this," and he promised put up \$1 million to help fund the park.

County Commissioner Larry Bustle gave the audience a quick history lesson in parks, explaining that deer parks were first set aside by the aristocracy with walls of thick hedges to keep the deer in and the people out.

"Thank goodness we can now enjoy our parks," Bustle said.

The park was officially opened.

"I could hardly wait to get out here," Myra Shoates said. "We've been dying for it to open."

In no time at all, children filled the playground. Some people headed for the lake and soccer field, and others went directly to the nature trail.

With the help of Florida state grants as well as private developers, the county park took years to plan and create.

"His dream is being carried out by his family," Bustle said. "What we have here is a success story."

The Bennett family was in attendance to honor Tom Bennett's commitment to community.

"Dad would have really been proud. He loved the land," son Richard Bennett said.

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The Lakewood Ranch High School Color Guard with County Commissioner Larry Bustle and Parks and Recreation Director Cindy Turner at the podium in the background at the grand opening of Tom Bennett Park at State Road 64 and Interstate 75.

