

Spotlight on Platinum Member

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Bennett Park Opens Saturday, November 12

By Dorothea Peterson

At first glance, it seems an odd combination of sprawling green grasses, old Southern oaks dripping Spanish moss and spine-straight palms resting sleepily next to a busy highway. Perhaps it is the perfect illustration of our modern society: the fast-moving urban sprawl that neighbors the peaceful scenery that is unequivocally older than everything around.



Aerial photo courtesy of Holland Construction

It is doubtful the ever-rushing commuters driving along I-75 near the State Road 64 exit know that they pass a bit of old Florida each morning. Perhaps a few of them see the glinting sunshine in their eyes coming off the scattered ponds and wonder what

exactly is over that fence as their cars pass by quickly. The sign says Bennett Park. The folks at the Manatee County Parks and Recreation Department, Holland Construction, Ruben-Holland Development, Kimley-Horn and Associates, and Turner Tree and Landscape will all tell you it is more than just a park.

Taken from old Florida farmland, the park is reclaiming its flora and fauna history. It is a modern-day marvel of how conservation and careful planning can successfully revert past events. The park has over 180 acres that have been cautiously developed in stages. Cautiously, due to the incredible amount of plant and wildlife the site contains even with its harrowingly close proximity to the interstate. Ask anyone involved and they all have stories of encounters with critters whether wild hogs, gators, deer, rattlesnakes, or birds. The construction crews even reported that during the busy phase of construction, animals could be seen taking cover in the surrounding woods but within two weeks of completion, there were visible signs of wildlife returning permanently.

The sheer responsibility of this project can be demonstrated on many levels. The design and permitting process took nearly nine months, its construction almost twelve. Why so much time? The answer is that anything worth doing is worth doing well. And Bennett Park has been done well.

Designing a project like this one takes more than just creativity, it takes ingenuity. The property was laden with existing old oaks that interfered with the desired layout of roads, trails, and proposed

structures. Instead of yielding to convenience, designers and planners collectively agreed on the inherent importance of incorporating existing landscape, determined to create a park that not only included this landscape, but made it its focus. Modifications were made to reposition the entire layout of the park and any proposed structures. Drainage features were also introduced to not only protect the trees during construction but against unforeseen heavy rains.



Drainage feature protects the park from flooding, while wildlife has a safe haven from urban development.

Consequently, the landscape added was to be Florida native only. Live oaks, red maples, sweetbay magnolias, slash pines, wax myrtles, bald cypress, chickasaw plums, and south Florida densa pines are just a few of the varieties one can see when walking through the park. The idea was to feature natural Florida and to replace what had been once removed. Not an easy task while Florida was experiencing one of the most difficult droughts of the decade. Coordination was essential as landscape installation was subject to an extreme time constraint of four weeks from start to finish and no one wanted to lose valuable landscape to drought. Managing to get material to the site on time and installed without any damage was intense. Installers were working on top of other installers. Irrigation had to be put in place quickly then tested and trees and sod were immediately installed afterward. Any lapses meant loss of valuable time and adding to already complicated budget.



One of the many winding nature trails.

What it accomplished was an outdoor space for families and the community to enjoy the wild beauty of Florida. Its location in central Manatee County demonstrates that Florida attractions are not limited to theme parks or beach resorts. Sometimes,

the best places in Florida can be found under a shady oak or sitting near the bank of a windy lake.

With a mile and a half of nature trails, a fishing pier, soccer fields, two playgrounds, sand volleyball courts, a canoe and kayak launch, Bennett Park has activities for any age and interest. The picnic pavilion will hopefully house many a birthday party or family reunion. Maybe the playgrounds are where future best friends will meet for the first time. This park stands as a wonderful gift to the residents of Manatee County from the Bennett Family.

The Grand Opening is scheduled for Saturday, November 12, 9:00 AM – Noon. Come out, bring the family and join the party!
Information: Courtesy of Holland Construction