

Neighbors and dignitaries celebrate the grand opening of Pickwick Park

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By Sandy Strickland

Pickwick Park is finished. No, really it is.

After 15 years or so in the making, the two-part passive park project had a grand opening celebration in late May with dignitaries that included Mayor John Peyton, City Council President Jack Webb and former Councilman Dick Kravitz.

"This has really brought people together," said Julie Scheck, accompanied by her daughter, Rachael, 9. "It's very impressive."

Indeed, Rachael showed how adeptly she could scamper up a large rock-climbing boulder and then stood on top to savor her triumph.

Other residents sat under pavilions and on picnic tables awaiting the red ribbon cutting, as the smell of grilling hot dogs wafted through the 5-acre neighborhood park, which is on a cul-de-sac at the end of Chrysler Drive.

The project goes back to the mid-1990s and was built in two phases. The first part was finished in 2008. It included playground equipment for younger kids, a pavilion, fencing, parking lot, landscaping and access entries.

But it closed for six months while the second phase was built. The entire project cost \$500,825 and was constructed with city and state funds.

Phase two includes another pavilion with picnic tables and grill, playground equipment for older children that includes two small rock-climbing boulders and an adult fitness trail featuring 10 fitness stations. For children, the piece de resistance is a large climbing boulder, the only one at a city park, although there are plans for more at other parks, said Daryl Joseph, park planner for JaxParks.

Pickwick Park is comprised of two lots purchased by the city. The first lot, which is 3.1 acres, used to be the community recreation area, said Pam Wilson, marketing and community relations manager for JaxParks. It contained a pool, tennis courts and play equipment. The pool closed in the mid-1990s.

The lot was purchased in November 2002 from a developer who planned to construct several homes on the acreage. The neighbors were opposed and asked Councilwoman Mary Ann Southwell to appropriate district funds to purchase the property for a passive park, Roslyn Phillips, director of the Department of Recreation and Community Services, said at the ceremony.

JEA transferred the other parcel, a private water utility plant on 2.2 acres, to JaxParks in 2003.

Peyton acknowledged the length of time to build the park's two phases but added that it was nice to celebrate the completion of such "a pretty park."

Joseph said getting funding was a major issue in the longevity of the project. A number of meetings were held at the home of Betty Wolfe, president of the Pickwick Park Civic Association and the major lobbyist for the park.

"The wish list was huge when we started," Joseph said. "We had to narrow down what the community wanted and what was doable from a funding standpoint."

Wolfe said members fought for years to get the run-down water plant torn down and the land bought for neighborhood use. She said it went through four council members (Kravitz, Southwell, Sharon Copeland and Webb) before both phases were completed but that everyone's hard work and persistence finally is paying off.

"Isn't it great," a woman commented as she walked around the quarter-mile track and past a fragrant-smelling magnolia tree.

Scheck said it's convenient to walk to the park or hop in the car and be there in 30 seconds or so to visit with neighbors. And Rachael is able to play with school friends, soar on the swing and practice her rock climbing skills.

In the future, Joseph said, the city would like to schedule a "Movies in the Park" event.

While a lot of the newer communities have clubhouses, Joseph said, this serves as the neighborhood clubhouse, even though it doesn't house a building.

"It's been a long struggle," Wolfe said. "I just hope everyone keeps it nice."

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[1]

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[2]

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