Planning Progresses for Environmental Learning Center
A little more than 10 years after a devastating flood carved a deep hole into the limestone near Canyon Reservoir, a longtime vision is taking shape for an educational complex at the ravine’s edge. Planners at the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA) believe the land the agency bought above the Canyon Lake Gorge in Comal County is the ideal place for people to learn about natural resources, particularly water.

No ground will be broken for the learning center until the newly formed nonprofit Guadalupe River Foundation has banked enough money to pay for it. But thanks to several important events, the center is closer to reality.

GBRA’s 10-county district stretches from Kendall County in Central Texas to Refugio and Calhoun counties on the Gulf Coast. The location for the learning center in the upper part of the basin fell into place when the land adjacent to the gorge became available, said LaMarriol Smith, GBRA public affairs officer. “The beauty of that site is its location — near both the gorge and our primary water supply at Canyon Reservoir,” Smith said. “It’s a location that made sense.”

When the story about the gorge, a new natural wonder in Central Texas, began to circulate, people worldwide wanted to see it. The GBRA and the Army Corps of Engineers, already jointly managing Canyon Reservoir, extended their partnership to the gorge. GBRA assumed a 25-year lease as manager.

Cinde Thomas-Jimenez, GBRA’s environmental education administrator, was the first person to train guides and lead tours into the gorge, which started in 2007. She also helped establish the nonprofit Gorge Preservation Society (GPS). Although chaotic at first, today’s smoother operations include a GBRA staff person dedicated to gorge management and between 50 and 60 dedicated volunteers who maintain the site and guide tours.

After GBRA bought the 21 acres above the gorge, workers razed a farmhouse to prepare for development, but left standing a garage which the GPS uses as a staging center for tours, a souvenir shop, and storage of supplies. Eventually volunteers will have space in the learning center.

GBRA’s vision

Water is only one subject that people would study at the proposed learning center, but it plays the biggest part in this story. Water created the gorge, scooping out giant boulders and dirt to unearth ancient fossils. This modern-day excavation formed by
the flooding event in 2002 reaches 50 feet in depth in some places and extends for about a mile. When people were able to explore the newly formed gorge, they found dinosaur tracks from more than 100 million years ago and countless other fossils.

The site for the proposed learning center features a hill that overlooks the gorge and the Canyon Reservoir dam, said Thomas-Jimenez. “With Canyon as our major reservoir, we can pull in a lot of concepts that we want people to be familiar with, such as why we built the dam, the Trinity and Edwards aquifers that feed into the river system, and Comal Springs in New Braunfels. Comal County is very water-rich, so this spot is ideal.”

She sees the gorge as an outdoor laboratory for people to view the aquifer system, which includes natural falls and areas in which streams and ponds form, disappear, then reappear. “It is interesting to see the emergence of water. Then it disappears and comes out again.” Much of the water moves through the system from the lake, but it also emerges from natural seeps that are part of the groundwater system, she said.

GBRA also tells this story with a middle-school curriculum called Waters to the Sea: Guadalupe River. The curriculum is part of an interactive, multimedia series about waterways developed by Hamline University’s Center for Global Environmental Education. Through historical characters, students learn about the history of the area and about Texas as a whole. The curriculum emphasizes importance of conservation and water quality.

The Internet-based curriculum helps keep GBRA up-to-date in its educational delivery, said Smith, as do its watershed kiosks in public areas that anyone can use — such as that in the Patrick Heath Public Library in Boerne and other areas of the basin. “These allow people to learn about the watershed in their area and things they can do to help keep the water healthy.”

Educational centers would be an extension of those educational efforts. Thomas-Jimenez and Smith spent about six months investigating similar centers to identify best practices and made a wish list for the GBRA complex. Architectural drawings show the area adjacent to the gorge off of the South Access Road near Hidden Valley Sports Park. Three buildings are surrounded by native gardens, oak trees, a courtyard basin, rainwater cisterns and nature trails. One building would house offices, another classrooms, and a third, exhibits.

The educational staff considered state-mandated education requirements that teachers must meet and looked at the big
picture concepts. “We visited quite a few centers in Central Texas,” said Thomas-Jimenez. “We want people to walk away with an understanding of the river system and the interconnectedness between ground and surface water.”

Another piece of that puzzle includes the different types of land through which water travels, she said. Giving people a more complete water picture illustrates Texas’ future challenges in terms of water quality and water quantity. She hopes the knowledge will lead to people using water wisely on an everyday basis.

Voices of the community

As a companion to the wish list, GBRA wanted to include community ideas and needs, Smith said.

GBRA board member for Comal County Rusty Brockman is one of the fans of the proposed learning complex. As director of economic development for the New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce and a retired educator, Brockman has a stage from which to tout the project. “The ELC would be easy to get to and benefit both teachers and administrators,” he said. “These are folks I know already, so gathering their support, no matter what kind of support, is important.”

Brockman likes the idea of sharing both ancient history and today’s lake with visitors worldwide. “The gorge and the history are part of the reason we have been able to garner so much attention. It’s nice to have that. When people come to take the tour, they will enjoy a world-class educational facility as well.”

Susan Bogle, a volunteer gorge guide and a board member for the nearby Tye Preston Memorial Library, supported efforts to build the learning center by participating in early community discussions. The 12-year resident of the area also helped choose Jackson-McElhaney Architects.
Bogle was instrumental in pulling together the future learning center’s neighbors — the library, the GPS and a nearby recreation center, said Thomas-Jimenez. A community meeting attracted many people who contributed ideas. GBRA already had done a lot of research, Bogle said. “From that perspective I saw how committed GBRA is to this endeavor.”

When it came to choosing an architect, the community wanted a firm that would respect the environment. “There is unique topography on the property. We wanted to work with that, not recreate it,” Bogle said. “Also, the access to it is important. The access has to consider cars and school buses and has to minimize the impact on the property. We don’t want to do an excavation. We want to take advantage of the views so that people can enjoy the environment.”

Even though the gorge is known worldwide, said Bogle, some local residents still have not gone to see it. “It’s not on their radar yet. Once the learning center goes in, it will be a wonderful piece of the puzzle to tell people more about the Canyon Lake area — the heritage, history, geology and paleontology.”

She noted that one of the slogans of the library is “Where books are only the beginning.” That means the library is more than just books. “The library has a high awareness of the qualities in the area and stresses living in and with your environment. Landscaping is all drought-resistant native plants. We have a nature trail, and we are trying to restore the trees.”

In the same way, she said, the learning center will be about more than water. “The idea of this learning facility in our area is more than what we could have hoped for. GBRA has chosen a wonderful location on the South Access Road. There is a community feeling along that road. It presents a tremendous opportunity for tourists and locals alike.”
Next steps

The proposed ELC will require financial support, both for its construction and for ongoing operation. Estimated cost of the building is between $5.5 million and $6.5 million, Smith said.
In 2012, GBRA established a nonprofit, Guadalupe River Foundation, to support all of its educational efforts and hired a grant writer.

Those were the first steps toward raising the funds that must be in place before building begins. Fund-raising could take four to five years and the total amount will determine the level of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification the construction attains. The LEED program provides third-party verification of green buildings, and there are different levels of certification. “The greener your building, the more self-sustaining it is,” said Thomas-Jimenez.
Exhibit Hall

Left:
View From Within

Bottom:
View From Above
“We hope to put water conservation features in restrooms and a green roof on one of the buildings. One building is oriented to capture natural lighting to reduce electricity costs, she added.”

Brockman, an economic development veteran, said the grant writer provides GBRA with an avenue for finding money. We are getting people interested in seeing the benefits of having an ELC in the community. Next steps will involve asking people who have a history of giving to environmental projects to take a look at the project. Having GBRA’s support and stability will help, he said.

“It’s never just a walk in the park,” Brockman said. “But we will have plenty of good resource material to show, and we are reaching into the next century. The groundwork we lay today will be important for a long, long time. If we tie it to the big picture and show how it affects us currently and for many years out in the education process, it will make our job much easier.

“We are on our way to hitting a home run for the state of Texas,” he added. “The gorge provides us with a great focal point for making our case.”
Left: Atrium Breezeway
Bottom: Learning Center Atrium
About the Guadalupe River Foundation

The Guadalupe River Foundation’s mission is to increase and enhance the public’s knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the natural science and aesthetics of the Guadalupe River Basin by developing, constructing, operating and maintaining Environmental Learning Centers and associated educational programs at locations strategically selected to optimize the uniquely inherent qualities of the river basin and its watersheds as invaluable resources for formal and informal teaching, study and research.

The GRF appreciates the support of federal, state and local grantees; corporate sponsors, public and private charitable foundations and individuals who value education and conservation of environmental and natural resources. Please join the GRF with your financial or volunteer support in expanding these learning opportunities with constituents of all ages.

To learn more about robust environmental educational programming available through the GRF and GBRA partnership, please contact Cinde Thomas-Jimenez at 830-379-5822 (ext. 311). To offer financial assistance, please contact LaMarriol Smith at 830-379-5822 (ext. 239).

Supporting the Environmental Learning Center

Naming Opportunities for the Proposed ELC are Available

Major components of the 20-acre site and facility include:
- Trail System
- Outdoor Classroom One
- Outdoor Classroom Two
- Observation Classroom
- Main Classroom Building
- Basin Exhibits
- Exhibit Hall
- Gardens
- Rain Roof
- Conference Hut
- Guadalupe River Basin Atrium
- Gorge Tour Orientation and Staging Area
- Office Building
- Gift Shop
- Permeable Parking Lot
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