
Using private funds to create an environmental education center on state property in Texas

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Abstract

In early 1993 urban wildlife and park staff initiated a first-of-its-kind program in Texas. These local state employees raised private money to fund construction of an environmental education center at the site of an old state fish hatchery on Sheldon Lake State Park. Area prisons supplied inmate labor for clearing, construction, and maintenance tasks. Businesses donated supplies and skilled workers. Volunteers gave of their time and talent. This culminated in the grand opening of the Sheldon Lake Environmental Education Center in March of 1998.

To date over \$831,000 has been raised from various sources. Three dilapidated buildings have been renovated into classrooms, offices, gift shop, and staff housing. Roads, sidewalks, and parking areas have been constructed or upgraded. Other site improvements include: development of 2 miles of nature trails, renovation of 2 of the .5 hectare hatchery ponds into children's fishing ponds, and planting of demonstration gardens that focus on composting, xeriscaping, and landscaping with native plants that are beneficial to wildlife. Hundreds of groups and thousands of individuals have attended organized events at the site since its opening in March of 1998.

The idea of field level state employees seeking private monies for a capitol project on state property was an entirely new concept. Procedures for soliciting and handling money had to be created and numerous barriers overcome. Unique partnerships with local prisons, businesses, foundations, and volunteer organizations stretched the funds that were obtained. The funding and management procedures established during the course of this project have allowed numerous other locally-initiated projects to develop and flourish across the state.

WHY DID WE START THIS PROJECT?

Texas Parks and Wildlife's first urban wildlife biologists began their jobs in February of 1993. Their mission was to develop innovative programs that would reconnect historically under served urbanites with nature in a way that would result in positive outcomes for both parties. The Houston urban team was assigned to Sheldon Lake State Park. The 1,100 ha park is located 22 km northeast of downtown Houston. A lake and marsh complex covers 500 ha of the park with the remainder in forests, farm fields managed for wildlife, and a state fish hatchery that closed in 1975.

The biologists and park staff recognized the potential of the hatchery. The incredible numbers and

diversity of plant and animal species at the site coupled with its proximity to downtown Houston, and the Department's desire to reach urban populations made it the natural choice as an environmental education center. Since its closure, the hatchery had become completely overgrown with vegetation. Each of its 28 one-half ha production ponds had developed its own unique character based on wet/dry cycles, fertility, and the nature of invading plant species. The original hatchery staff residences, offices, and maintenance buildings were in poor condition due to lack of maintenance and vandalization. Financing the site's renovation would be a problem, but recent budget shortfalls had increased the department's willingness to consider external funding sources.

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CHALLENGES FACED

Capital-intensive projects were historically initiated at the Department's headquarters in Austin. A team composed of mid-level staff, accountants, engineers and inspectors oversaw each project. Funds were set aside in special accounts and dispensed according to established budgetary procedures.

Sheldon Lake Environmental Education Center was the first field staff-initiated project with money coming from sources outside the Department and bypassing the established channels. Lack of an Austin-based team and procedures for field staff dealing with large amounts of outside money caused a great deal of concern among headquarters staff. Considerable delays occurred as committees were formed to study the problem and establish new procedures and guidelines. Additionally, many charitable organizations were unable to give grants directly to state agencies. A tremendous amount of site preparation was needed before the area could be reopened to the public.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

A major breakthrough in dealing with these problems came in the form of The Parks and Wildlife Foundation of Texas. This Foundation is a tax-exempt organization set up to solicit and administer outside monies for Departmental projects. The Foundation's status as a non-profit organization enabled other foundations to give it grants. After a year's delay, headquarter committees established procedures for soliciting and disbursing funds through the Foundation. With this hurdle cleared, support for the project grew, inspectors were assigned, and the project moved ahead.

Houston's long-growing season and moderate rainfall were very conducive to rapid plant growth. Grass-covered pond banks in 1975 became thick woods with a dense shrub understory by 1993. The massive amount of potentially expensive site preparation needed before the hatchery could be reopened to the public was provided through an innovative partnership with county and state jails. Inmates performed over 20,000 hours of work in preparing the site for its grand opening. Huge numbers of trees and brush were removed. Trails were constructed. Garden beds prepared. Debris was removed from the abandoned buildings, and a fishing pier was built. Inmates continue to provide valuable assistance with grounds maintenance and additional site development.

PROJECT COSTS AND TIME LINE

During the last 6 years, \$831,000 in grants and in-kind labor has been raised for the Sheldon Lake Environmental Education Center project. An initial project grant proposal for \$368,000 was submitted to Houston Endowment in August of 1993. Houston Endowment awarded \$200,000 toward the project in January of 1994 and \$100,000 in 1996 and 1997. A proposal for \$163,000 worth of road and trail improvements submitted to the state highway department in 1993 was selected for funding in 1995. In 1997, the Houston/Galveston Area Council of Governments awarded \$100,000 for the construction of a recycling classroom. Also in 1997, Texas Parks and Wildlife's Hunter Education Program gave \$40,000 for classroom renovation at the site. Small grants totaling \$25,000 were received during the period of 1993-1998. The initial 20,000+ hours of inmate labor involved in site preparation was worth \$103,000, calculating minimum wage at the time.

WHAT'S BEEN ACCOMPLISHED?

Since the start of the project in 1993, the area around the buildings and the first 2 ponds has been cleared of brush and most non-native trees. Three of the buildings have been rebuilt. One became a combination office, gift shop, and volunteer meeting space; the second is a classroom; and the third houses an on-site park ranger. Inmates, staff, and volunteers constructed more than 2 miles of trails, a picnic area, an outdoor classroom, a handicapped-accessible fishing pier, and demonstration wildflower, xeriscaping, and composting gardens. A new well was drilled. An innovative "rocks and reeds" wastewater treatment plant was created using underground processing tanks and the old hatchery raceways filled with rocks and wetland plants. These plants are used to absorb the excess nutrients from the treated wastewater before it is sprayed on the demonstration gardens. The entrance road was widened and resurfaced. Parking lots and sidewalks were added. Water lines were run to the first 2 ponds, which were stocked with fish for organized events and family fishing. The aquarium was renovated and an informative trailhead kiosk installed.

Early in the project, scout troops and community groups built bluebird, bat, and wood duck nesting boxes and helped put down crushed granite gravel walkways. A volunteer organization was established and helps with area maintenance, the Park store operation, and scheduled events.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Future plans for the Sheldon Lake Environmental Education Center include construction of additional public restrooms, an expanded educational center, and a native plant greenhouse. Additional grant proposals will be submitted to cover site maintenance and improvement costs, and to fund outreach programs to disadvantaged youth and community organizations.

WHO'S BENEFITTED?

Sheldon Lake Environmental Education Center is currently used by community groups and the general public who are interested in hands-on environmental education and the enjoyment of nature. The site has hosted hundreds of groups and thousands of individuals since the gates first opened in March of 1998.

The project has been equally important as an example of innovation within the Department. The new procedures put in place since its creation has allowed field staff in other parts of Texas to seek outside funding on a wide variety of local projects.

IN CONCLUSION

A combination of timing, hard work, perseverance, a 501 (c) (3) foundation, and the development of important local partnerships made this project possible. Groups interested in starting similar projects in their areas are encouraged to consider the problems they are likely to encounter and prepare local solutions for them.