

## Eilers Park Revitalization Project, 2010

A 1920s Austin Chamber of Commerce brochure described Eilers Park as "...one of the beauty spots of Texas." And it was, indeed, with giant cottonwoods and willows, a swimming beach, a concrete pool, a bandstand, summer cottages, free moving pictures, a Ferris wheel, a diving mule, and more. But despite its prime location and colorful history, today the park is in need of restoration. The facilities are dilapidated with much of the grounds overgrown by invasive plants and shade trees mostly past their prime. In 2009, Friends of Eilers Park (FOEP) initiated a campaign called "Bring Back Eilers Park" to restore the park to its original splendor. This parkland has excellent potential to serve Austin families. It provides access to Lady Bird Lake and is a major trailhead for the hike and bike trail with its ADA-accessible ramp. It provides much-needed picnic facilities and play areas for Deep Eddy pool swimmers and other visitors.

Efforts to revitalize the park began in 2006 with a survey to assess what park users saw as critical needs and to gauge the potential for community commitment to an improved playground, shading for the playground area, and the addition of shade trees throughout the park. Beginning with that study, FOEP began work on the park. With several small grants and donations they spent three years on clean-up, removing invasive plants, installing native plants, and planning. In the spring of 2009, FOEP commissioned designs by TBG Partners landscape architect, Justin Lindabury, and Studio-Fuse designer Kelly McKeachern to address the wishes of Austinites expressed in the survey, to meet the vision for the park developed by FOEP and to recapture the historical ambience. The master design creates renovated recreation areas for all ages, improved access to the lake with an enhanced and repaired dock, and increased biodiversity with the introduction of new native plant landscaping.

FOEP believes that all of the features of the master plan will increase positive park usage and leave a lasting physical impact on the park. Phase 1 of the plan provides new play activities for children, makes picnicking in the park more attractive and comfortable, and adds shade trees and wildlife-friendly plantings. The pursuit of certification as a community wildlife habitat serves an educational function as well as creating a more pleasant ambience. Finally, there have been intermittent problems with transient camping and truant and gang activity at the park. Continued removal of invasive plants, especially along the west border, as well as increased numbers of park visitors, will reduce opportunities for such activities.

The long-term plan includes

- Revitalizing and expanding picnic areas
- Replacing playground equipment
- Developing creative, natural playspaces for diverse age groups
- Improving shade with landscaping and shade structures
- Refurbishing the ADA accessible ramp to improve access to the park
- Continued installation of native plants to encourage biodiversity with a goal of certification as a community wildlife habitat
- Exposing panoramic lake views from all areas of the park
- Repair and enhancement of the existing dock for water sports accessibility and improved safety
- Construction of a colorful, interactive fountain and splash pad designed to be reminiscent of the historic Ferris wheel

- A new lake-view natural amphitheatre and performance stage
- Expansion of functional space by incorporating the unused land at the northeast corner of the park
- Addition of multi-use structures for exercise and stretching
- Allowance for the potential extension of the hike and bike trail

In the spring of 2010, FOEP held three fundraising events and continued to work on cleanup and landscaping. In May, FOEP was awarded a \$50,000 grant from Austin Parks Foundation. During the summer and the rest of the year, the group plans to work on at least four other grant application submissions and other fundraising projects to meet requirements for matching funds. FOEP will also be involved in coordinating and cooperating with all interested parties in the work approved for the APF grant. This includes installation of an irrigation system, installation of new playground equipment, replacement of picnic tables, construction of a concrete walk from the existing walkway to the children's playground, and major landscaping. FOEP is in the process of forming a garden club to help maintain its native plant gardens. At present, about 50 people have expressed interest in participating.