

\$6 million slated for park upgrades, new dog park

County prepared to give Robert E. Lee some tender loving care

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(Enlarge) A family of ducks swims in Lake Roland at Robert E. Lee Park on July 10. Baltimore County is planning to take over the maintenance of the park from Baltimore City and do \$6 million worth of upgrades. Results would include a reopened pedestrian bridge and a secure dog area within the park. (Staff photo by Matt Roth)

If Robert E. Lee Park is the hidden gem of the Lake Roland area, Baltimore County now has the money to transform it into the crown jewel.

The county has \$6 million to make repairs and improvements, including reconstructing and re-opening the pedestrian bridge, restoring the existing trails, installing parking and setting up a secure dog park, according to Bob Barrett, director of the county's Department of Recreation and Parks.

Barrett said the entire 453-acre property was essentially an illegal off-leash dog park before it was closed off. In fact, there were more dogs than people in the park, he claimed.

Note to dogs: The new dog park will be legal -- but confined to only one area of the park.

Barrett said the dog park and erosion control measures for the park are budgeted for \$2,002,000; the bridge replacement \$2,833,600; and roadway improvements and parking \$1,243,720.

He said work on the park upgrades will begin after the county signs a long-term lease with Baltimore city, which owns the park -- even though it's in the county.

He expects the agreement by mid- to late summer.

Barrett also expects the lease will involve a nominal fee charged by the city, and will be a long, long-term pact, he said. "We don't want to get evicted after we get it all rocking and rolling."

It will take a year to 16 months before the improvements are completed, he said, noting they are the first phase of a larger plan that, in future years, might include dredging the reservoir as well as adding paddle boat activities, fishing tournaments and concerts.

"This is great stuff," he said. "I am enthusiastic."

So is the Ruxton Riderwood Lake Roland Area Improvement Association, which has worked for a decade for the transfer.

"Lake Roland and the surrounding parkland are valued assets in our community, but they have been sorely neglected over the years," said Kathy Palencar, the improvement association president, in a prepared statement.

"We are optimistic that Robert E. Lee Park now will become the crown jewel that it deserves to be."

More than 41,000 people visit the park each year, according to the association. It is one of the largest parks in Baltimore County.

Its heart is Lake Roland, which was created by the damming of Jones Falls in 1861 to produce one of the first municipal water supplies for the city.

The city stopped using the lake for drinking water in 1915, but the area thrived as a recreational park. However, the city has had limited resources to devote to park management and maintenance, and the park has fallen into disrepair.

The Ruxton Riderwood Lake Roland-Area association has urged attention to address environmental erosion, criminal activity, disrepair of existing park structures and capital projects to restore them. The association has also noted the off-leash dog situation and its impact on health, deterioration of trails and the need for new ones, and the issue of individuals who have actually taken up residence in the park.

In 2004, it was the association that first broached the idea of the county taking over the park.

About \$3 million of the \$6 million for the restoration of the park came from the state, according to Barrett. The county matched the amount.

"I think we did extremely well in Annapolis," Barrett said.

He noted County Executive Jim Smith's testimony before the legislature and also backing from the 42nd District Sen. Jim Brochin and Dels. Sue Aumann, Steve Lafferty and Bill Frank.

"County Executive Smith is enthusiastic about this important community and environmental resource," said Smith spokeswoman Ellen Kobler. "The county is looking forward to working with the community to determine our next steps."

Barrett said that, following the signing of the lease with the city, one of the next steps will be arranging a meeting during which the county will lay out its plan for this first phase of improvements.

"We want community input in the process," he said.

He also plans to set up an advisory council for the park.

"We expect that cooperating and partnership will make it all work," he said.

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