

Colorado River Foundation has found its signature program

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A \$15 million project in Central Austin originally announced as an LCRA emergency management center stands to bloom into something much more.

In February, the Lower Colorado River Authority announced it was constructing a new building at the corner of Red Bud Trail and Lake Austin Boulevard. The quasi-governmental water utility plans to use the site as a central location for its public safety and emergency operations, especially during crises such as floods.

But the most interesting aspect of the site — dubbed the Red Bud Center — could lie outside the building's walls.

The Colorado River Foundation, a nonprofit partner of the LCRA founded in 1994, will oversee a 4.5-acre interpretive park to teach conservation and illustrate Central Texas' river system, focusing on its importance as a regional water source. The river-side project marks the nonprofit's largest endeavor to date, says foundation Executive Director Emily George Seiders, and could well turn into its most prominent program.

Since January, the group and LCRA have worked with more than a dozen elementary and middle school teachers to brainstorm on curriculum. For instance, six large basins will mimic the Highland Lakes and end at the river itself; students will also see how water makes its way through the system to their homes. LCRA has planned to landscape the area with more than 12,000 plants in 140 different species.

In addition to housing LCRA when it opens next summer, the 35,000-square-foot building at Red Bud will serve as the foundation's new home. The park is set to open

DO YOU KNOW YOUR WATER SOURCE?

The Colorado River Foundation wants to educate Central Texans about environmental issues that affect their river. According to a survey conducted this summer for the LCRA:

- 68 percent said they thought they knew or definitely knew where their water came from. But most — particularly in urban areas — incorrectly identified their local water source.
- In Travis County, almost half said they believed groundwater, well water or the Edwards Aquifer served as their main water source. But the largest source is surface water from the Colorado River.
- More than half of respondents weren't aware of efforts to save water or what they could do to conserve water use.

Source: LCRA

privately in 2007, says Frank Falkstein with LCRA marketing, allowing the foundation time to beta test its learning material. It will open to the public in spring 2008.

The move marks a significant step for the foundation because it will be the group's first continual program.

Until now, the group has primarily conducted an annual river cleanup and raised money for kids' scholarships to an LCRA river-rafting education program. With one part-time and two full-time employees, the foundation operated on about \$326,000 during its 2005 fiscal year.

But its budget has already grown in anticipation of the move. This fiscal year, it increased to \$375,000, and Seiders expects that to continue expanding. She estimates that the foundation needs to raise about \$120,000 for the park's first two years. It will also hire a volunteer coordinator to oversee curriculum and manage docents and other aspects of the program.



SUBMITTED RENDERING

The Colorado River Foundation will share its new home near downtown with the LCRA.

"I feel like we're at the ground floor of something great for the foundation," Seiders says. "This is going to become our signature program."

The effort comes on the back of some recent success by the foundation, whose net income increased by about \$130,000 last year. Seiders attributes that growth to burgeoning interest among the community and reduced expenses.

And the Red Bud site, just west of downtown on the river, gives the foundation a much more visible location than the anonymous Northwest Austin building where it is currently tucked within another company's

office. Julie Morgan Hooper, the former executive director of the foundation who now leads fundraising at SafePlace, says the project shows the foundation is maturing.

For example, she remembers an Earth Day event held on Auditorium Shores when she was director of the foundation. A woman asked her where the Colorado River was located, not realizing that its waters made up Town Lake just a few yards away.

"It's important for any nonprofit to be connected to its mission," Hooper says, "and for the Colorado River Foundation to be physically connected to the river is very important."

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