

"Small in Size, Big on Vision - Calhoun Plots a Bright Future"

By: NewCities Institute, CITYSCAPE

CALHOUN

Big things are happening in the small city of Calhoun, thanks to a determined effort to boost economic development, attract tourists and make Calhoun a more livable place for its citizens.

Calhoun has added three new parks to its landscape, which is all the more impressive when you consider that the city's population is a mere 813. The largest of the projects, tentatively named Fort Vienna Park in honor of the city's original name, sits on the edge of the Green River.

Using grant money, the city built a small shelter on the park grounds. With electrical outlets at the top of the structure to protect against flooding, the building also serves as an ideal, picturesque location for musical performances and other events.

Galena Fulkerson, a community advocate who was elected mayor in November, believes the park gives the city a chance to establish some strong entertainment events at the water's edge, which could lead to a significant boost in tourism. "And it's also a good form of entertainment for the people of Calhoun," she said.

Benches have been added, three with backs that face the shelter, allowing people to sit comfortably while watching performances. The remaining three have no backs and give visitors the option of watching the entertainment or just listening to it while turning in the opposite direction for a view of the river.

City officials were not content with simply giving park goers nice places to sit; however. They also wanted to make sure that the land offered something for those who want to improve their physical health. The land features a track that parallels the riverfront and a bike rack for people who choose to pedal to the park rather than drive.

Calhoun has also been busy with an area that will be called Gazebo Park. The land sits next to the bridge that looms over the Green River and offers a peaceful place for visitors. Fulkerson noted that the park is close to two local restaurants and has several benches, giving visitors the option of picking up food and taking it to the park to enjoy a picnic. "It's meant to be a place where citizens can just relax and watch the river go by," Fulkerson said.

The third park, located across from the Senior Citizens Building, has swings for children and a one-sixth-mile walking track.

These three parks should improve the quality of life for locals, but city leaders aren't stopping there. City officials are working with McLean County Judge Executive Larry Whitaker and the county's fiscal court to get a new project, Myer Creek Park, up and running.

Since the creek area is owned by both the city and the county, deeds were exchanged to designate the land as a city-county park. Although the project won't be complete until 2007, community leaders have been doing all they can to make sure they create a park that is attractive. Public meetings were held so citizens could discuss the amenities they would like to see offered. Among the suggestions were an agriculture center, fairgrounds and an amphitheater.

Officials have high hopes for the park, Fulkerson said. "Hopefully Myer Creek will bring in tourists and enhance economic development for our area. The 4-H Ag Center should create this type of development," she said.

By working to increase tourism and bring in outside dollars, by entering into partnership with county officials to benefit everyone, and by involving its citizens directly in charting what they want for their future, Calhoun is a great example of small city finding ways to thrive.

The city isn't stopping there in its efforts to connect to its surroundings. To forge a further connection with the county and region, officials are examining the possibility of extending Green River into Myer Creek.

Fulkerson believes that the efforts the city has been making will yield only positive results. "In the past we may have missed some opportunities for enhancement of our city," she said, "but I think that now the future is bright."

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