

New trail cleared in preserve

By: Eric Aikin, Courier staff

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In what was more of a ground mulching than a ground breaking, workers cleared away a trail Thursday to open a new 71-acre natural preserve to the public.

The preserve is located just off Pruitt Road, near the Precinct 3 recycling center in an undeveloped area south of The Woodlands.

Jennifer Lorenz, the executive director of Legacy Land Trust, accompanied by three naturalists, spent two hours marking a winding, half-mile trail through the wooded area. Then, just after noon, an All-Season Vehicle Mulcher made its way along the path the women marked, creating Montgomery County's first natural preserve.

The preserve, which is actually the state of Texas' first conservation easement, is unique in this area because of its blend of flora and fauna.

"What's really nice is that two streams converge here," said April Proudfit, referring to the confluence of Spring and Panther Creeks. Proudfit is a naturalist and 20-year member of the Native Plant Society of Texas.

The environment makes the area a perfect breeding ground for plant life, such as Walter's Violets and Jack and the Pulpit.

"The Jack and the Pulpit is a whitish flower that's found mainly in wetland areas," Proudfit said.

She added that some of the plant life is a rarity in this area.

"The special thing about the vegetation in Montgomery County is that Walter's Violets don't usually occur this far west," she said. "It's like a little niche here."

In addition to the vegetation, plenty of birds and other wildlife inhabit the land, according to Diane Cabiness, also a naturalist.

"There are signs of a lot of wildlife," she said. "We saw a Pine Warbler, a cardinal, an opossum, and deer tracks."

The natural preserve came about as an arrangement between Montgomery County and the Legacy Land Trust.

Originally, the land belonged to The Woodlands Land Development Co., L.P. and was set aside as a flood mitigation site and wetlands area.

As part of the agreement setting the land aside, the development company had promised to protect the land, according to Fred LeBlanc, environmental manager for The Woodlands Land Development Co. In order to protect it, a conservation easement was developed. The easement prevents commercial or residential development of the area.

The development company already was in negotiations with Montgomery County to sell some of the land surrounding what is now the preserve. Ultimately, the development company ended up trading the 71 acres in south county for 74 acres near the San Jacinto River. The value of the properties was roughly equal, LeBlanc said, although he did not have exact dollar amounts immediately available.

Once the county took possession of the land, county officials began working with Legacy Land Trust to ensure the integrity of the land would be preserved.

"Legacy Land holds the easement," Jennifer Lorenz said. "We will come out annually and make sure no degradation has occurred. Basically, we'll work with the county to preserve the preserve."

The preserve is scheduled for its public opening Mar. 2, rain or shine. Lorenz has invited local schools and expects several to take part in the opening. She said the area will provide an excellent opportunity for schools, scout groups and others to learn more about nature. At the preserve's opening, tour guides will be available, the Audubon Society will do bird talks, there will be mushroom talks, and wild edible expert Carmine "Papa" Stall will give a talk on the natural history of the area. Lorenz said the public is welcome, but should call (713) 524-2100 and reserve a space. The "vine-cutting" ceremony is free and begins at 1:30 p.m.

To get to the preserve from Interstate 45, take the Rayford-Sawdust exit west. Turn left on Budde Road. Go 1.1 miles south to the Citizens' Recycling Drop-off Facility at 1122 Pruitt Road, which is on the left side of the road. Guides will provide directions from there.

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