

Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum celebrates grand opening

Recreational, teaching and research center located near Riverside Park

By KEVIN PASSON
Special to *The Post*

MILWAUKEE – An old industrial site along the Milwaukee River near Riverside Park has been transformed into a world-class, biologically diverse native ecosystem, the largest of its kind in southeastern Wisconsin.

The Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum, encompassing 40 acres and valued at around \$8 million, opened to the public Sept. 28.

“This is a living, breathing gift that will be here for decades,” said Mary McCormick, executive director of the Rotary Club. “It reflects what Rotary is all about.”

The arboretum extends from North Avenue on the south to Locust Street on the north, stretching upward through Riverside Park. It will be bounded on the west by the Milwaukee River and the east by the Oak Leaf Trail.

The \$400,000 contributed by Rotary members was the catalyst for building the partnerships responsible for the project. It features 3.7 miles of trails, including a two-mile wheelchair-accessible loop; more than 2,200 newly planted trees representing 72 species native to this area and more than 70,000 shrubs and herbaceous plants; three outdoor learning centers for school children; a pedestrian bridge; a fishing dock; and a wheelchair-accessible canoe launch.

“Back in 2006-07 when Jim Barry was president-elect, he proposed we do something special for the community to commemorate the club’s 100th anniversary in 2012-13,” McCormick said. “He wanted it to be a project our members could be excited about.”

Ten suggestions were brought forward, and they were eventually narrowed to three and then the one – the arboretum – was chosen as the project.

“(The late) Peter Godfrey and the Urban Ecology Center made a proposal that combined education and children with the environment, issues that align very well with the mission of Rotary,” McCormick said. “It started with the old industrial land donated by Peter Godfrey.”

Under the leadership of the Urban Ecology Center, the Rotary Club and its partners – the River Revitalization



Photos by Robert F. Borkowski

Left: Kathie Eilers, president of the Milwaukee Rotary Club, speaks at the grand opening of the new Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum located on the Milwaukee River Greenway near the Urban Ecology Center, 1500 E. Park Place, Milwaukee. Right: A sign cut from weathered steel stands fixed on the hill adjacent to the stone arch entrance at the new Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum.

Foundation, the Milwaukee Urban Rivers Foundation, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources’ Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, Milwaukee County and the city of Milwaukee – developed the Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum as the gateway to the Milwaukee Greenway.

“We are thrilled to share in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to convert old industrial land along the revitalized Milwaukee River into a natural jewel for the city – a living forest classroom that our grandchildren will be able to enjoy and share with their grandchildren many generations to come,” said Ken Leinbach, executive director of the nonprofit Urban Ecology Center.

Officials at the Urban Ecology Center, who will maintain the site, estimate that 300,000 people will take advantage of the arboretum each year.

The Urban Ecology Center has a long-term lease with the county to manage the land at Riverside Park, and Leinbach said the plan is to amend the lease to include the arboretum.

Leinbach said the Urban Ecology Center originated in 1991 under a different name.

“It really took off in 1999-2000,” he said. “As an environmental community center, we sometimes ‘create’ nature in an urban environment to provide outdoor education-

al opportunities.”

To preserve and maintain the arboretum, an endowment fund has been established, from which only the interest generated will be used.

“The endowment fund has pledged of \$750,000, and we as a club expect to raise another \$250,000 by the end of the year,” McCormick said. “The Urban Ecology Center will work to bring the total to \$3 million in the next 10 years.”

Federal and state support were key to the development of the arboretum. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources been a partner in the planning the project since its inception. A \$1.3 million grant from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program was required to complete the land acquisition. A Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant from the Environmental Protection Agency recognizes that enhancing the land quality along the river will improve the water quality of the Milwaukee River, which feeds directly into Lake Michigan.

According to the Urban Ecology Center website, the arboretum benefits the community as it increases community access to the Milwaukee River with a path accessible to those with limited mobility and families with strollers. The arboretum expands the

outdoor classroom used by Urban Ecology Center educators and has been dedicated as a Children’s Forest by the USDA Forest Service, which is specifically focused on connecting children and families with nature.

The arboretum increases opportunities for ecological research in a unique urban environment, and the diversity of native species provides a source of seed stock for the region. Replacing invasive species with deep-rooted native species improves water quality and reduces storm water runoff.

“The arboretum is the latest step in the evolution of the area,” wrote Aaron Zeleske, arboretum project coordinator, in a blog updating Rotary members on the progress of the project. “Ever since the North Avenue Dam was removed in 1996, the Milwaukee River Corridor from Estabrook Park to downtown has been going through a remarkable transformation. Waters that were once highly polluted and supported only a few species of fish now teem with life. The odors and toxins that pervaded the water are thankfully but a memory.”

And now, the arboretum will allow children and families to make new memories, as they enjoy the natural ecosystem of the area.