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# Arkansas Democrat Gazette

## NORTHWEST ARKANSAS EDITION

### Officials seeking advice discover two-way street

BY ROBERT J. SMITH  
 Posted on Sunday, February 3, 2008  
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FAYETTEVILLE — The Woolsey Wet Prairie Sanctuary represents a small segment of the \$ 187 million that the city is spending on citywide sewer system improvements, but it's the piece of the project that caught the attention of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Now, the wetland prairie on Broyles Road serves as a national example of what other cities can do adjacent to a sewer plant.

The bright colors of spring had changed to dull shades of brown, tan and green by the time the EPA's Randy Kelly visited the 28-acre prairie in October. The petals of almost every flower had fallen. Still, the EPA's deputy associate administrator for intergovernmental relations liked what he saw as city officials explained how treated sewage will occasionally be pumped into the wetland to keep it from drying up.

The sewer plant will start operating this spring.

"I'm impressed with the time and attention and the sensitivity you have for the environment," Kelly told his city tour guides in October. "It's going to be interesting to monitor the wetlands. It can serve as an example of what can be done." For years, Northwest Arkansas officials have traveled elsewhere to find ideas for building schools, libraries, football stadiums, auditoriums and sewer plants, but officials from elsewhere also come to Northwest Arkansas to find what they'd like to mimic.

Visiting delegations found ideas behind the walls of Springdale's

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Willis Shaw Elementary School, which opened last fall, and 2-year-old Springdale Har-Ber High School.

Other groups toured the Fayetteville Public Library after it was named Library Journal's best library in 2005. Best library designations tend to lure extra traffic from those looking to build their own libraries, said Louise Schaper, the library's director.

Officials from other cities have also visited the former bank that was renovated in 2006 into the Rogers City Administration Building. "It's probably accurate to say it's a demonstration that some projects here are getting some regional or national coverage and attention," said Jeff Shannon, dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. "Otherwise, no one would know about them. " The region is getting more sophisticated in its design and planning." WETLAND PRAIRIE Fayetteville Mayor Dan Coody met Kelly at a U. S. Conference of Mayors event and invited him to see the wetland prairie and other steps the city has taken toward improving its "sustainability." A term used in business, industry and government, sustainability refers to finding ways to operate without hurting the environment and harming future generations. It includes such things as recycling, reducing water consumption and designing buildings so they require less electricity and natural gas for heating and cooling.

The city's plan to discharge some treated sewage into the wetland prairie during dry times of the year before the water reenters streams — keeping the wetland vibrant — is seen as helpful for the environment.

David Jurgens, Fayetteville's water and sewer director, describes the wetland prairie as the "biggest plum" in the entire sewer improvement project, even though it's one of the last expensive components.

"We're going to have houses everywhere and a big green area in the middle, and that will be the wetlands," Jurgens said as he led two EPA officials on the tour.

The wetland prairie was named after the Samuel Woolsey family that once lived on the property. The family's farm, where Samuel and Matilda Woolsey raised 13 children, was one of the oldest white settlements in Washington County, dating to 1830.

"There were bison here and eastern elk," said Bruce Shackelford, the president of Environmental Consulting Operations Inc., the Benton (Saline County ) company that's helping the city improve the wetland prairie.

Those species left decades ago. The eastern elk is extinct.

Cattle grazing, fire suppression and other factors over decades reduced the number of native plants on the land where the wetland prairie is being developed. Shackelford noted just 47 species between 2001-2005.

But the city took steps to improve it. The cattle were removed in May 2006. Pipes were installed to control the flow of water and treated sewage, and earthen berms were constructed two months later.

By August 2006, 166 species were noted. Plant seeds can lie dormant for more than 50 years and then grow when conditions are right, Shackelford said. By May, the number of plants had increased to 265 species. "We've changed our strategy on how to manage this a zillion times. And we'll continue to do that," Shackelford said. "This is my pet project. I'm loving this." Kelly said in an interview that it's a nice, unique example of what can be done next to a sewer plant. It's not being copied by any city in the nation — yet. "It's clear Fayetteville and that region truly does want to create a green valley," he said.

**BUILDINGS** The development of a wetland prairie provides one of the more unique reasons for visitors to come to Northwest Arkansas. Most come to see bricks and mortar.

Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport in Highfill saw occasional tours after it opened in 1998. Groups from Killeen, Texas, and Bakersfield, Calif., came to see the \$ 107 million airport, said Kelly Johnson, the airport's director.

"The bloom has worn off after nine years," she said. "It's been a couple of years since anyone has been here." New schools and athletic facilities in Northwest Arkansas draw much of the attention these days.

Representatives of school districts in Conway, Searcy, Greenbrier, Huntsville, Little Rock and Newport have toured Springdale schools in recent months, said Ron Bradshaw, the Springdale School District's assistant superintendent for special services.

Janet Blair, a curriculum specialist for the Newport Special School District, said her October tour of Springdale's Shaw Elementary School served as a nice example of what her district can do at a planned \$ 15 million elementary school.

Her district hasn't built a new school since the 1960 s, Blair said.

The proposed school in Newport, like Shaw Elementary, will house kindergarten through fifth grade. Shaw has 800 students, and the Newport school will have slightly more. The goal is to have the Newport school open in two years.

"I spent all day looking at the Springdale schools," Blair said. "We wanted to see what they did well and what they did that they didn't like." Lauren West, the Bentonville School District's athletic director for six years, said she's helped organize tours of the school district's multipurpose indoor practice facility and shown high school athletic officials the synthetic turf on the district's football, baseball and softball fields.

Officials with school districts in Fort Smith, Mountain Home, Harrison and Webb City, Mo., have toured Bentonville's athletic facilities, West said.

"I think we are all keeping up with the Joneses, and Bentonville is leading in athletic facilities right now," West said. "We all have our peripheral vision out. We all want to be the best at everything." The visitors have come longer distances to see the Fayetteville Public Library, said Schaper, the library's director.

In fact, three separate groups associated with the Pioneer Library System have traveled from Norman, Okla., to Fayetteville to see the library. The Oklahoma system hopes to replace the nondescript, 35, 000-square-foot library that went up in the 1960 s.

One of the Pioneer system's groups also went to the Fort Smith Public Library. Jeff Scherer, the architect who designed the Fort Smith and Fayetteville libraries, is working with the Pioneer system group.

"We'd like to be a destination library like Fayetteville is," said Anne Masters, the Pioneer Library System's director. "We'd like a fine architectural building that the citizens of Norman can be proud of. This is a community that prides itself on valuing education and we have a university. We're like Fayetteville." The main campus of the University of Oklahoma is in Norman, a suburb of Oklahoma City.

Travelers interested in how Fayetteville put together its library also came from Clarksville; Jonesboro; Tulsa; Springfield, Mo.; McAllen and Garland, Texas; and Lawrence, Kan. They all looked to get ideas from the \$ 23 million library that opened in 2004, said Schaper.

In Rogers, the renovated office building that's now City Hall grabbed Russellville's attention last year. Russellville Alderman Bill Eaton called Rogers Mayor Steve Womack, who grew up in Russellville, and asked for a tour of the new city hall in September.

The Russellville group also visited the 55, 000-square-foot Rogers Adult Wellness Center and the 125, 000-square-foot John Q. Hammons Convention Center. Both buildings opened in 2006.

Russellville wants to renovate its two-story City Hall. Built in 1926

as the Russellville Masonic Lodge, it's on the National Register of Historic Places and was sold to the city in the 1940 s.

The building's second floor is vacant, but it had been rented by the Freemasons until a few years ago when the group built a new lodge.

Eaton said the city needs the second-floor space and plans to expand into that area. The goal is to retain the Russellville building's historic integrity, Eaton said.

The trips to the adult wellness center and the convention center in Rogers also fit with what Russellville has planned, Eaton said. In June, Russellville voters extended a 1 percent sales tax to pay for renovations of the historic building. The money from the extended tax also will be used for street and drainage improvement and to pay for part of a 60, 000-square-foot convention center north of Interstate 40 by Missouri hotel developer John Q. Hammons.

IDEAS FROM ELSEWHERE Northwest Arkansas officials have long looked elsewhere for ideas before pursuing construction projects. "Fayetteville is an educated town, and you don't stay at home and just watch television to get educated," said Coody, the Fayetteville mayor. "You have to go see the world.

" It's a two-way street." Springdale's Har-Ber High opened in 2005 after officials traveled to high schools in Missouri, Kansas, Colorado and elsewhere in Arkansas helped shape the district's plan for the school, said Bradshaw, the district's assistant superintendent.

"It didn't end up a lot like them," Bradshaw said. "We found out in some cases what we didn't want to do, but we also picked up some good ideas." Bradshaw said a high school in the Kansas City metropolitan area "made a statement that it was an educational institution" when you first drove toward it.

With its red brick and six white columns, the front of Springdale's second high school looks more like a small university than a high school, Bradshaw said.

"I said we needed to capture that presence," Bradshaw said. "If you take off the front of Har-Ber, it's pretty common. It's just a door opening if you take off the front.

" But we put additional expenditure into the front and the cost wasn't much in the scheme of the whole project. Looks-wise, ours is as good as any school we saw." One of Arkansas' most unique buildings is an exact copy of a building from elsewhere. The idea for UA's Old Main came 130 years ago from a building at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said Larry Foley, a UA journalism professor who helped produce a documentary titled Beacon of Hope: The Story of the University of Arkansas.

In 1871, the Arkansas General Assembly appointed a university board of trustees and picked Fayetteville as the location of what was first called Arkansas Industrial University. Fayetteville was picked as the university's location over Batesville and the Washington County towns of Viney Grove and Prairie Grove.

Classes started in January 1872, but a main campus building was needed.

"The trustees went to several Midwestern universities," Foley said. "They liked the building in Illinois from the first time they saw it.

" Surely, one of the things that attracted the board of trustees was it just doesn't look like anything else. It's stately and has a character all its own." Originally called University Hall, its construction was completed in 1875 after the drawing for the Illinois building were purchased from Chicago architect John Van Osdel, Foley said.

Shannon, UA's architecture dean, said there aren't exact copies of buildings these days.

"There's a proprietary interest," Shannon said. "They might want something very similar, but you aren't going to get a direct copy in the way Old Main came about."

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