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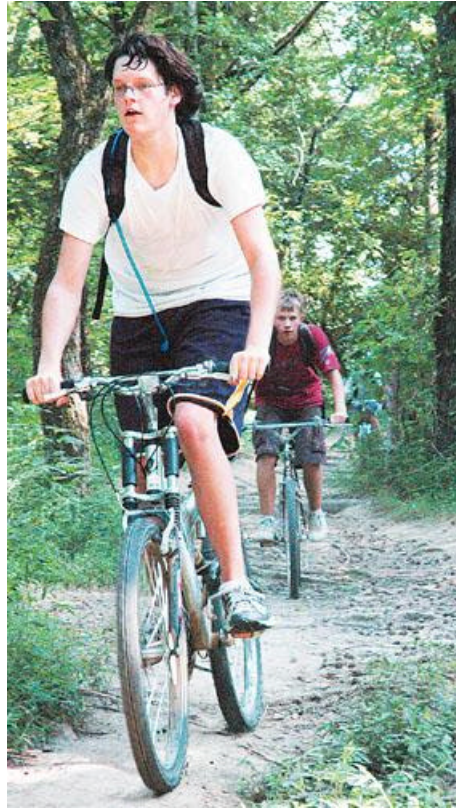
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WEDNESDAY, JULY 26, 2006



Adam Robbins (left) and Jared Sturgell ride bicycles down the wooded trails at Nesbit Park on July 8. Josh Crigger, Matt Sturgell and Wesley Green joined the pair on their ride through the popular park. Photo by John Fee

Nesbit Park - Off-road cyclists' paradise

by Dawn Boone

It's more than 350 acres of undeveloped land sitting between Bartlett and Memphis off Yale Road. Chances are many Bartlett citizens have driven past it every day and don't realize this jewel Bartlett acquired from Shelby County in 2004.

Known officially as Bartlett Park, and as Nesbit Park to the many Bartlett residents who knew the former landowner, the conservation area has received a few nicknames over the years, including that of "Stanky Creek," dubbed by area off road cyclists who use the park. As large as Overton Park in Memphis, the land has the potential to become a statewide attraction for bird watchers, campers, hikers and nature lovers.

Katherine Nesbit gave the property to Shelby County to be used as a natural conservation area after her death. The old sign declaring it a land and water conservation area still stands in the parking area of the park today; however, the land is now in the Bartlett reserve area and is owned by the city of Bartlett.

As for now, mostly off-road cyclists take advantage of the maze of trails that run through the area, but some believe the land should be used differently.

Some Bartlett residents think the cyclists are taking advantage of the land because the city has put no restrictions on the use of the property, leaving it open to areas of

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lost vegetation due to man-made BMX trails and jumps.

But cyclists see the area as a perfect opportunity to view nature. Off-road cyclists from around the area tout the joy and challenge of riding the park's three trails. Each trail has a different level of difficulty.

"As far as I know, it's the only single track bike trail anywhere around this part of the country. The Bike Shop in Millington told me about it when I began working at the air base," said Christian Eggers, an avid cyclist and Navy pilot who now lives in Bartlett.

It is unusual to find so much undeveloped land sitting in the middle of a suburban area, and Bartlett Parks Director David Thompson said the park will remain that way - undeveloped.

"Of course there have been developers wanting the property. But we aren't letting go of it. We see that land as having great potential for growth into an area that can provide everyone with something as far as outdoor recreation. The cyclists' club has been taking care of the trails and doing a good job," said Thompson. "The city only has to clean the parking area occasionally."

Some people would like to see the park used in other ways, and citizens and city leaders are offering their opinions on how Bartlett can best use the land.

"There is a lot that can be done there without upsetting the original intention of keeping it as a conserved natural area," Thompson said.

Scott Hardin, who uses the park for trail riding, agrees. He believes the park is big enough to allow bike trails and areas for other activities, such as camping.

"There is plenty of room for campgrounds and the bike paths. The woods are pretty thick and most cyclists stay on the trails I believe," he said.

Donna Kelly and her daughter, Katie, recently moved to Bartlett from Tipton County because Donna believed her previous area was being taken over by developers. She relocated to Bartlett in part because of the park system and the bike trails at Bartlett Park.

"We wanted to move to Bartlett because of the unique status it has as a sports town. This bike trail is part of that. It's a great way to spend time with your family and it's free," Kelly said. "There aren't many places like this area left to get out into the undisturbed places and exercise. We met a family on the trails the other day teaching their little boy how to ride. It was sweet."

While the cyclists now have the liberty of using the area unrestricted, that could soon change if Bartlett residents like retired Bartlett police captain Don Robertson have a say in what will be done with the land and how the city uses it to promote nature and conservation. Robertson and other residents who knew Nesbit believe she wanted the property to be kept as natural as possible, and they are persuading the city to conserve this area.

Editor's note: See the story in next week's Bartlett Express to learn why some citizens want to keep Bartlett Park a pristine, natural area and how city officials are addressing those concerns.

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