



**Date:** January 18, 2008

**To:** Mayor and Members of City Council

**Through:** Patrick W. Baker, City Manager  
Wanda S. Page, Deputy City Manager

**From:** Rhonda B. Parker, Director, Parks and Recreation

**Subject:** Presentation on the Future Development of Leigh Farm Park

### **Executive Summary**

Staff from the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) have been working to bring Leigh Farm on-line as a City Park by 2010 – the date required for the park to be open in the City’s lease of the site from the State. Funding for stabilization of the historic structures on site was approved in the 2005 bond; that worked has been scoped, approved by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and is currently being brought under a contract for architectural services. Because the site is unique to the City’s park system, DPR is proposing a network of partnerships between the City and other organizations to bring a range of recreational and educational activities to the park. The City Council’s approval of this direction for the park’s development is vital before we continue to do more work with our proposed partners.

### **Background**

The Leigh Farm Park project is one that has been put together by many agencies over a period of time. The initial master plan for the park was funded by a grant from the Junior League of Orange and Durham Counties in 1992. The site was identified as the southern anchor of the New Hope Creek Open Space Master Plan. Acquisition of the 87 acres that currently make up the park has been a joint effort of the City, Durham County, the State of North Carolina, the Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC), and non-profit and volunteer organizations such as the Historic Preservation Society, the New Hope Audubon Society, and the Friends of the New Hope.

In 1995 the City agreed to lease the 25 acres of the site that the State had purchased; those parcels contain the majority of the historic buildings (City Council action, September 18, 1995). Early in 2005, the City purchased two acres from the Triangle Land Conservancy to complete the holdings on the site. The forty-year lease with the State committed the City to begin restoration work on the historic buildings and to open the site as a park by 2010: “The Lessee shall manage the property as a public park to be operated and maintained by the Lessee and shall be responsible for restoration of the historic structures located on the property within 15 years.” Currently, a caretaker lives in the main house and oversees the property’s safety. The historic buildings as a group are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2005, Council approved a contract with Edwards-Pitman Environmental, Inc. for an architectural and archaeological survey of the site, historic preservation plans, historic structure reports, design review guidelines, restoration cost estimates, and required research reports for government agencies. That work was completed in 2006, including two public

meetings with Leigh Farm Park stakeholders, representatives from the New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee, and members from the earlier Leigh Farm Park Advisory Board; and it is serving along with the Master Plan as the basis for ongoing work on the site. The November 2005 bond issue allocated \$300,000 for building renovation, and staff are currently negotiating a contract with an architectural firm that specializes in historic renovation work.

The report developed by Edwards-Pitman is available on line on the City web site at [http://www.durhamnc.gov/departments/parks/park\\_assessment\\_leighfarm.cfm](http://www.durhamnc.gov/departments/parks/park_assessment_leighfarm.cfm). This recent report, the original Master Plan from 1992, and the requirements of the lease with the State all have guided recent park development efforts. The Edwards-Pitman report recommends eight Action Items for the park “to begin the transition from a dormant property to an actively-used part of the Durham parks system”: (1) Stabilize buildings; (2) Organize non-profit support group; (3) Form an advisory committee; (4) Network with other museums, historic sites, organizations, and agencies; (5) Improve visitor access to the park; (6) Continue to develop trail system; (7) Explore innovative uses; and (8) Identify sources for educational programming.

### **Current Action**

- 1) Stabilize buildings –City staff are currently working on contracting out the architectural design and construction administration on the building elements most in need of renovation. Funding is \$300,000 from the 2005 bond.
- 2) Organize non-profit support group – See # 3 below
- 3) Form advisory committee – staff have revived and re-organized the original Leigh Farm Park Advisory Committee into the “Friends of Leigh Farm” which is composed of several non-profit organizations plus City of Durham staff. Non-profits represented include the Historic Preservation Society of Durham, the Historic Preservation Society of Chapel Hill, Durham Orange Recreational Disc Golf Association (DORDA), South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces (SEEDS), Piedmont Wildlife Center, New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee, Junior League of Durham and Orange Counties, Trenton Road Neighborhood Association, and descendants of Richard Stanford Leigh. Two planning and organizational meetings and a site meeting have been held to date.
- 4) Network with other sites – while we are not to the point of programming yet, key organizations and agencies that we will network with are represented on the Friends group; we anticipate beginning site programming as soon as we have visitor support elements in place (restrooms and parking).
- 5) Improve visitor access to the park – this fall staff used existing funding to demolish two derelict houses on the site, adjacent to the historic structures; one of those sites is being graveled to serve as an *ad hoc* parking lot. DPR is asking for funding as part of the 2008-09 CIP request for additional upfits required for visitor access: water, sewer, and restrooms.
- 6) Continue to develop trail system – Piedmont Wildlife Center, in cooperation with the City, has begun the process of creating trails and nature walks. We plan on rejuvenating existing but overgrown farm paths wherever possible to provide access throughout the park.
- 7) Explore innovative uses – this item has received a significant amount of staff effort in the past year and is the subject of the heading “**Innovative Uses**” below
- 8) Identify funding sources for educational programming – while funding sources have not been identified yet, the City is planning to partner with non-profits such as

Piedmont Wildlife Center and SEEDS on environmental education programming for children and adults.

### **Innovative Uses**

As part of the process of bringing Leigh Farm to life as a City park by 2010, DPR has been working with several local non-profit organizations to get improvements and activity to the site.

- a. Durham Orange Recreational Disc Golf Association (DORDA): DPR is supporting the group's request for a Durham Open Space and Trails Grant to construct a disc golf course at Leigh Farm Park, on land away from the historic core and environmentally sensitive areas. This group has proven itself willing to work hard (having made many improvements to the course at Valley Springs Park) and is partnering with students from Jordan High School.
- b. South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces (SEEDS): SEEDS is actively seeking funding to restore the historic gardens at the Leigh Farm main house and would plan to hold gardening classes and workshops as well as continue its ongoing work with young people.
- c. Piedmont Wildlife Center: DPR has been working with Piedmont Wildlife Center, a 501(c)(3) organization, on a possible partnership that would advance and support the park's master plan. Piedmont Wildlife Center's goal is to support native North American wildlife and its habitat through rehabilitation, education, and research, with emphasis given to wildlife and wilderness of the North Carolina Piedmont. To further this mission, Piedmont would like to locate its administrative offices, environmental education programs, wildlife hospital and associated intern/staff housing in Leigh Farm Park. As well as responding to several of the Edwards-Pitman Action Items, Piedmont Wildlife Center's activities would support the development and use of Leigh Farm Park as per the 1992 Master Plan:

- ◆ "The entire site should be enjoyed as a resource-based recreational area. Activities which would encourage use and enjoyment, but not endanger the integrity of environmentally sensitive areas on the site would include: Hiking; interpretation of biological, cultural, and historic features . . . nature hikes . . . Hiking and nature trails should be the preferred method of travel." Piedmont's use would support these environmental goals; in addition, they would also like to partner with the City on environmental education programs.

- ◆ "The existing farm trails (some are overgrown) can be restored and used for access to other areas of the farm . . ." Piedmont Wildlife Center would work with the City to reopen these farm paths, creating the system of trails and nature walks called for in the Master Plan. They would plan on using these trails for educational nature and wildlife walks.

- ◆ Two sections in the Master Plan specifically recommend the use of existing structures as headquarters for non-profit groups such as Audubon Society or Sierra Club. Piedmont Wildlife Center's proposed use would be in keeping with this goal. The use of the park as a wildlife sanctuary clinic and associated operations is an approved accessory use to the park. No re-zoning would be required.

**Council Action**

All of the groups mentioned above are willing and ready to raise funds to contribute to improvements at Leigh Farm Park; all have been active members in the ongoing discussion about forming a new Leigh Farm Park advisory body. At this point in the process, however, staff would like some response from Council on the direction that this park is taking.

We do not want to encourage these non-profits to get actively engaged in raising funds for work at Leigh Farm Park that City Council does not support.

If, for instance, Piedmont Wildlife Center raises funds to convert some empty buildings on the site for an animal rehabilitation hospital or an environmental education classroom, the City would want to lease these buildings and the immediate area surrounding them to the organization. The SEEDS organization, if it runs programs on the City park site, would need to be able to coordinate those programs with City staff to make sure all relevant liability concerns are addressed. DORDA's golf course layout is planned to use both park land and some of the conservation easement area lying between the historic site and the adjacent office park.

If members of City Council can foresee problems with and have objections to the shared-use direction in which staff is directing this park development, we would benefit from learning about those issues as soon as possible.

Thank you.

Attachment: Print out of Powerpoint presentation on Leigh Farm Park