

Lake Roland Park opens nature center

New facility part of multiyear effort to improve a 'diamond in the rough'

By **JILL YESKO**
For The Baltimore Sun Media Group

Visitors to Lake Roland Park say the park's new \$14 million Nature and Environmental Education Center supplies a missing piece for a site that's increasingly popular with residents on both sides of the Baltimore city-county line.

"Baltimore County saw there was something missing to hold year-round programming, especially during the winter months," said Elise Butler of the Lake Roland Nature Council, a nonprofit that helps administer the park with the county's Department of Recreation and Parks. "The nature center was the next logical step."

The 2,594-square-foot facility, which had a formal ribbon-cutting Wednesday, is the latest addition to the park. It includes 500 acres of wetlands, meadows, forest and the lake, which was dug in the 1850s as a reservoir for the city.

Officials say the nature center offers a comfortable space for programs that were previously held outdoors, such as wreath-making classes, a winter camp for children and Trails Over Truancy, a program that brings city middle-schoolers to the park for environmental activities.

Shannon Davis, head park ranger at Lake Roland, said the center also will allow the park to expand evening classes and a master naturalist course that's run in

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Shannon Davis, head ranger, Lake Roland Park

conjunction with the University of Maryland Extension Service.

"We used to hold the program in a tent," she said.

The center includes improved parking for disabled patrons and a home for a dozen creatures — including Cornelia, a 3-foot-long albino corn snake, and a hissing cockroach that Davis said is a favorite of children.

"They love the grossness of it," she said.

While owned by the city, Lake Roland Park is managed and maintained by Baltimore County through a 100-year lease. The county took over in 2009 and closed the park for two years for upgrades that included building a boardwalk from the Falls Road light rail station, a new picnic pavilion, an off-leash dog park and the establishment of nearly seven miles of volunteer-maintained hiking trails.

It reopened in October 2011, and last year underwent a name change from Robert E. Lee Park to Lake Roland Park.

County Executive Kevin Kamenetz said the county has invested significantly in Lake Roland, which he said was a "diamond in the rough" when the county took



NICOLE MUNCHEL/BALTIMORE SUN MEDIA GROUP PHOTOS

Natural artifacts and creatures are on display at the Nature and Environmental Education Center at Lake Roland Park. The \$1.4 million facility had a formal ribbon-cutting ceremony Wednesday. The park was formerly known as Robert E. Lee Park.



Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz said the county has invested \$7 million in Lake Roland Park to ensure that it "showcases nature at its finest."

it over.

"With this new \$14 million nature center, we have now invested more than \$7 million to transform it into a very accessible park that showcases nature at its finest," Kamenetz said.

Attendance at the park has grown steadily, from 42,000 visitors in 2011 to 315,000 so far this year, with many

attending programs that include bird counts, environmental activities and camps-outs.

"What you see when you come into the park is joy," Davis said. "I didn't see this five years ago."

Advocates say improvements at Lake Roland have been completed with an awareness of the park's history. In 1992,



Cornelia, an albino corn snake, is one of the residents of the new center. Another is a hissing cockroach. Kids "love the grossness of it," said park ranger Shannon Davis.

much of the park was declared a National Historic District in recognition of elements that include a Greek Revival-style pump house, and dam and structures from the Baltimore & Susquehanna Railroad.

Davis said the park's history is just one aspect of what makes it unusual.

"We're one of the few parks in the nation that has a light rail going right to it," she said.

Future plans include landscaping the center with native plants and the construction of interpretive kiosks along the park's trails for people with disabilities.

"This has been a very interesting way that this park has evolved," Butler said. "It's going to be interesting how the nature center will be used."