

Editorial

Sports

Lifestyle

Business

Front Page

Haverhill

NH News

Local News

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Family hike to spark interest in cleaning up Den Rock Park

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LAWRENCE -- When you stand at the top of Den Rock Park with trees spreading out in every direction, the bustle of the city appears to be miles away.

Yet, it is only a 10-minute hike to the top from the entrance on Route 114.



Activist **Tennis W. Lilly** (left) of Lawrence and **Den Rock Park Steering Committee** facilitator **Beth E. Brazil** of Lynnfield sit atop the park in Lawrence. Lilly and Brazil are members of a group trying to revive the park.

"You are in the middle of Lawrence, there are trees and butterflies everywhere. People need to connect back to nature," said Beth E. Brazil, education programs manager for the Merrimack River Watershed Council.

Den Rock Park is one of the last bits of wilderness in Lawrence. Yet, it has long been neglected. Reminders of civilization are the road noise, the rutted, washed out trails full of broken glass, and roofing materials someone dumped at the top.

The park takes its name from a 30-foot rocky outcropping, the centerpiece of a park that borders Andover and North Andover. Den Rock is a destination for rock climbers from all over New England to practice their sport. The park's entrance, which consists of a sandy turnaround and a metal gate and no sign, sits across from the North Andover Mall.

To revive interest in the park, Brazil and others are planning a day for families to hike, canoe and rock climb on Aug. 11. Details of the event are still being worked out.

"The best thing that will protect Den Rock Park is having people love it as much as we do," said Lawrence Grassroots Initiative Executive Director Tennis W. Lilly.

parking improvements at the 81.5-acre park, located south of Interstate 495. That master plan has not yet been released, but it soon might be, Brazil said. Two priorities include improving the small, five-car parking area and handicapped trail access, she said.

A year ago, the city got a \$10,000 matching grant from the state's Department of Environmental Management for the master plan study.

The study will look at realigning trail routes to prevent erosion, identify abutters, supply legal research on the city's responsibility for easements within the park, and provide a cost estimate for improvements. Officials in the Office of Planning and Development could not be reached for comment.

To get things going, a collection of private, nonprofit groups and city leaders have formed a steering committee to guide improvements. The groups include city planners, the watershed council, the Lawrence Grassroots Initiative, Groundwork Lawrence, and the Lawrence Trails Committee.

The land had once been eyed by developers.

In recent years, three developments have sprung up on the edge of the park and destroyed the sense of isolation, Lilly said. They are the 174-unit apartment complex River Pointe at Den Rock Park, the 27-home Stirling Woods subdivision on the former Champy property, and the 240-unit apartment complex Jefferson at Den Rock Park.

The Jefferson project, which Mr. Lilly and others fought against, includes a fenced-in detention pond and retention wall that cut across a trail on land owned by the development.

The watershed council's interest in the park comes from 46 acres of the former Champy property it maintains that abuts the park in both Andover and Lawrence, Brazil said. The Shawsheen River, which feeds into the Merrimack, also borders the park to the north.

Lilly would like to see more city residents use the park. The densely packed city of 72,000 population lacks quality open space, Lilly said.

"It's an environmental justice issue, really," he said.

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