

Executive Summary

Tunica Hills State Preservation Area

Recreation and Tourism

Recreation and Tourism are an important part of the economy of West Feliciana Parish. Tourists visiting this area come from all over the world and normally stay several days in the area enjoying the rural environment and visiting the local historic homes. The Tunica Hills State Preservation Area will help the economy by adding another attraction for the visitor's agenda.

The Tunica Hills State Preservation Area will provide an unusual place for visitors to encounter and discover nature. For the enthusiast hiker and camper, the Preservation Area will provide several levels of trails and the possibilities of primitive camping. Additionally a proposed Adventure Sports component will add to the draw for local, regional and national visitors. This would widen the target market for potential visitors.

The Master Plan

Program Development

According to the State Parks Master Plan 1997-2012, it defines a preservation area as:

“...those areas of exceptional scenic value, which because of their unique characteristics, should be preserved for the current and future public enjoyment.”

A preservation area by definition presents a challenge for development of any man made improvements within its protected limits. The fundamental task confronting the designers on this property is to offer the short-term visitors a sampling of the finest features of the property without jeopardizing the fragile environment, which is meant to be protected.

Interpretive Program: The interpretive program at Tunica Hills State Preservation area is designed to take advantage of the following goals and to help the visitor experience:

- A sense of awe and discovery of nature
- A close relationship with the land and the river
- A part of human history

To help the visitor understand:

- The natural history of the area; its wildlife, climate, native plants
- The geological process of land formations
- The historic importance of the place

To influence the visitor to:

- Protect, respect and take care of the area
- Explore the entire area
- To hike in nature and explore

Adventure Program: The adventure program at Tunica Hills State Preservation Area is designed to create action-oriented activities to take advantage of the following goals and help the visitor experience:

- The extensive change in elevation throughout the site.
- Movement through the trees, above the ravines, streams and trails.
- Rugged hiking and primitive camping
- A different perspective to view the ecosystem – above the ground

Immediately upon entering the site, the visitors should be gathered at a collection point and be transported into the site via a controlled transportation system. The controlled transportation system should take the visitors through the site, interpreting the site as they move through it. As visitors proceed through the site to their destination the visitor is introduced to the adventure sports element on a visual basis only.

At the end of the controlled trip, visitors will disembark and proceed to a major central point of the site. This focal point should be a site that represents most of the features of the site. At this major central point, additional interpretation can occur or people can be allowed to descend into the creek beds where trails will bring them in contact with nature. While in the trails, people can learn, interpret and appreciate the beauty of the Loess formation in the steep vertical slopes of the area.

Trails throughout the site will take the visitors to specific areas of interests. Different levels of trails will accommodate from the novice to the expert hiker. At several specific points, visitors will be introduced to unusual land formations, dynamic views and exciting experiences, and adventure sports opportunities

Program List Conceptual Development

The program is designed to feature the following interpretive themes:

Natural and Geological Interpretation – to show the geological history and natural resources of the site, by illustrating the physical process that shaped the site, and the resultant natural habitat. That would include site geologic stratigraphy, paleontology, geomorphologic transformations, evidence of sedimentation cycles of the river, and exhibits of flora and fauna that are found in the Loess Hills.

Historical and Archeological Interpretation - to show how this site relates to the salient cultural themes for this part of the state, those being European – Indian contact, the influence of the Mississippi River on historic settlement, plantation archaeology, and the development of the West Feliciana railroad.

The Journey: There are features of interest at each of the distinctive natural resources. This pristine site is 530 acres in size and extends over 1.6 miles from the bottomlands at Tunica Bayou, in line with the river. It extends 1.2 miles deep, over very steep rugged terrain, bordering the Wildlife Reserve, from the river's edge toward the Old Tunica Road. To ensure that the visitors have the opportunity to witness and experience these

contrasting natural environments in the most meaningful way, with the least impact on the resource, great care was given to the placement of the programmed facilities on the property. Additionally, consideration was focused on how the experience would develop, how the visitor would be introduced to the natural amenities of the site, and how they may be drawn into the hills. We wanted the experience to start with a peaceful serene arrival, lead to anticipation during the journey, and end with a high level of drama. The following Charette summaries document the master plan design evolution that led to the solution that best accomplishes that goal.

The Public: The treasure of Tunica Hills lies in the beauty and serenity of the site more than the sacred archaeological artifacts left by the Tunica Indians. The introduction of public visitors to the site must be handled in a sensitive and careful manner.

Building Concepts and Setting: This building program includes two distinct functional divisions, the Interpretive Center with its various exhibit spaces and platforms for interaction with nature, and the public and staff support buildings that compliment it. To address this site and build in a location within its rugged terrain necessitates “out of the box” thought and ingenuity. From the initial discussions with the State Parks office, the planners have embraced and fostered the concept of experiencing the Tunica ecosystem from within, but without damaging the fragile environment.

The support buildings should be constructed in a conventional manner on grade with materials that rest naturally in their setting at the perimeters of the site where past habitation has been previously established. Site access, service, and utility support should be kept at the boundaries of the interpretive areas. They should remain simple, true to form, and natural.

The Interpretive Center must be constructed in the heart of the fragile environment that is so irreplaceable. It must incorporate innovative non-invasive construction applications that cause the very least physical impact on its surroundings, and should respect the conditions, nature, and sensitivity of the site. It must be designed to enable all visitors to experience the site without damaging the environment. It must be accessible and exhibit low maintenance. A rugged valley of steep incline that exhibited the widest spectrum of natural amenities was chosen as the ideal location for the Interpretive Center.

Building Style and Context: The facility design should set naturally in the wooded site where conventional construction permits. Buildings must be of “sustainable design” and should endeavor to reach LEED standards. Attention should be directed to employment of energy conscious systems and building design, use of recycled materials and renewable natural resources, and application of low-toxic finishes. The buildings must be inviting, exciting, and maintain a psychological connectivity with nature through transparency, visual openness, and clarity. Style should not be dictated by the vernacular design of generations past. This facility should be designed in a manner and style that embraces its natural setting and functions as prescribed by the Program.

Design Approach

The design approach for this project began with several visits made over a one-year period. Each visit was planned at different seasons and weather conditions to study the changes in the environment. Because of the size of the site and the difficult terrain, each site visit was limited to areas not previously explored. The design team members were Tim Pampell, Office of State Parks; Tom Holden, Holden Associates; Joey Furr, Joseph Furr Design Studio; and Jose Barro, SJB Group.

Master Plan – 2004

The Preliminary Master Plan evolved using the site visits, the design charette and the land-use analysis. The plan was developed in 2004 and included the following elements

Entrance- The design team made Old River Road the main entrance into the site. This entrance will give the visitor a typical southern Louisiana experience. The land in this area is relatively flat and floods occasionally. A new bridge over Tunica Bayou or rebuilding the old railroad trestles for access was an option.

The entrance road will lead into a parking area where the land begins to increase in elevation. The parking area will be designed among the existing trees and will be crushed stone surfacing. This is the terminus for all public vehicular transportation. From the parking area a pedestrian walkway will lead the visitors into the Entrance Station.

Entrance Station- At the Entrance Station, the visitor experiences the outdoors while indoors. Enclosed completely in glass and blending into the environment, the entrance station is a rustic building. The building is located close to the edge of a bluff over Pollock Bayou. In this building, the visitors are instructed about the preservation area and its amenities.

Once the visitors leave the Entrance Station, they approach the bluff over Pollock Bayou. This bluff is approximately 40' to 50' above the bayou. At this point, the visitors begin experiencing the first major changes in elevation. Then, the visitor crosses a wooden pedestrian bridge over the bayou to a tram pavilion.

Internal Transportation to the Interpretive Center- Once across the pedestrian bridge, the visitor is transported into the site via an electric or gas-powered tram. The tram follows the land formation showing the visitors the diversity of the site such as some steep inclines, valleys and creek beds. The tram has a capacity of about 30 persons. At the end of the tram ride, the visitors disembark at another tram pavilion and walk along a ridge top a short distance to the Interpretive Center and the amphitheater.

Interpretive Center –From the tram station the visitor walks along the top of a ridge. From there, the visitor sees only the top structure of the Interpretive Center. As the visitor gets closer to the edge of the ridge, he sees the lower structures and the walkways.

The Interpretive Center is an impressive series of four elevated structures connected by suspended pedestrian foot bridges. Each of the major structures will house different learning and interpretive centers. There are several open platforms allowing the visitor to experience the outdoors within the tree canopy. The building structures simulate tree trunks and the buildings simulate the canopy of the trees. The suspended bridges have an open grated surface to allow transparency of the structure. The supporting structures and bridges are made of Cor-ten steel, a material that ages to deep auburn rust color, therefore blending into the environment.

The buildings are modernistic and blend into the environment. The glass walls allow maximum exposure of the surrounding environment. The structures will rise from the bottom of a creek bed, flanked by steep walled slopes. The visitors enter the top building via a suspended bridge at the tree top elevation and subsequently move downward to the bottom exiting at the creek bed. At the bottom, the visitors can begin the trail experience.

An exterior balcony is provided on the perimeter of each building unit.

Trails- Beginning at the base of the Interpretive Center, the trails systems lead the visitors to exciting places and unusual land formations. The trails are designed to allow the visitor to discover new and exciting features of the site such as discovering a waterfall or fossil in the loess hills. Some trails follow the creek beds; others lead to ridges and bluffs. In some instances the trail are boardwalk, necessary to protect the environment. There are several levels of difficulty in the trails systems from the novice hiker to the most experienced hiker.

Overlook- One of the most exciting bluffs in the state occurs on the western part of the site along the Mississippi River. The bluff is about 200' above the river and gives a dramatic panoramic view of the river and the surrounding area. At this spot, a cantilevered platform allows the visitor to walk to the edge of the bluff and enjoy the view. From here, the visitor can ride a vertical lift or gondola down the bluff to the river's edge.

Group Camping- Two buildings provide a staying place for visitors and researchers who would like to spend the night at the site. The two buildings are built on opposite ridges. A swing bridge connects the units from ridge to ridge.

Primitive Camping- Several areas in the site are designated for primitive camping. Scouts and other organizations can use these campgrounds for overnight accommodations.

Manager's Residence and Maintenance Building. Since the park manager will be spending most of his/her time on site, a residence is developed on site. In addition to the residence, a maintenance facility is provided for repair work, storage of equipment, and routine maintenance operations.

Master Plan Update - 2011

Through a cooperative land swap agreement the Office of State Parks obtained additional acreage that was originally an out parcel that was land locked by the existing State owned site. This property has been assessed and very basic master planning has taken place in this area.

Additional detailed master planning will be required to effectively incorporate this part of the site into the plan in order to fully capitalize on all of the sites attributes.

In addition the idea of a cooperative agreement with and adventure sports tour provided has been discussed as an opportunity to enhance the experience of the park without degrading the resource. This element too would require additional planning for both a legal and physical design standpoint.

Tree Top Zip Line Tours - This would be a multi – faceted tour through the treetops of the site via zip lines. This would be an eco-sensitive trill ride with an interpretive slant. It would potentially start at the Mississippi River overlook and traverse across the streams and ravines, hiking trails and tram trails. It would be a low impact activity as utilized in Whistler B.C. _____ Colorado and _____ among others. This would add an exciting draw for potential visitors and would increase the economic impact of the park. A vendor, not the Office of State Parks, would likely provide this adventure sports element. The vendor would have experience and staff to provide the tours, and would be contracted with through a cooperative agreement between private State and or Parish entities.