

With purchase, park expansion complete

BY ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star

A piece of Lincoln's prairie past will soon become part of Pioneers Park and the Pioneers Park Nature Center.

City officials announced Thursday that they have acquired 230 acres of rare native prairie just west of the park. They say it was used by the Burlington Northern Railroad as a watering and feeding stop for livestock in the early 1900s.

"The community's vision for the future of Lincoln and Lancaster County includes preservation of unique natural landscapes including rare tracts of native prairie," Mayor Coleen Seng said at a news conference. "I am so pleased that this land is being added to Lincoln's beloved Pioneers Park."

The Parks and Recreation Department plans to preserve and manage the prairie tract, which includes two ponds, as a prairie preserve, said its director Lynn Johnson. Management plans include burning to encourage native plant growth and grazing herds of buffalo and elk. Visitors will be able to catch a glimpse of what early settlers found when they settled eastern Nebraska.

"Prairie land like this is vanishing," City Councilman Jonathan Cook said. "It's important to set aside land like this for our history and the future of Nebraska."

More than 12,000 school children participate in tours and learning activities at the Pioneers Park Nature Center annually. The center's mission is to provide learning opportunities about Nebraska and the Great Plains.

The tract was purchased recently from David C. Martin, Sony Lowery and Carol James, who are the children of the late David A. Martin and his wife, Bonnie.

"The entire family is very happy about this and thrilled that it will remain what it is today," Sony Lowery told the crowd.

The Martin family has played a key role in the expansion of Pioneers Park. In 1997, David A. Martin donated 57 acres and the city bought 100 acres. The city acquired another 80 acres from the Martin's estate in 1999.

"The Martin family has worked very closely with the City of Lincoln to establish a marvelous legacy of land conservation and parks enhancement," Seng said. "I want to express our gratitude for their commitment and vision."

The tract, located near S.W. 47th and West Van Dorn streets, is a critical piece of land because it is the last remaining native prairie adjacent to Pioneers Park. It completes an expansion project that began in the late 1990s and boosts the total park acreage to more than 1,100 acres.

"This was the most important piece to acquire because of its connection to all of the other parcels of land," said Terry Genrich, natural resources and greenways manager for the Parks and Recreation Department.

The nonprofit Lincoln Parks and Recreation Foundation paid \$5,500 per acre for the 230 acres or about \$1.26 million. But officials say the city will pay much less for the property. Here's why:

The foundation will work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to establish an easement under a national grasslands conservation program.

The USDA will pay the foundation the majority of the value of the property for the easement.

The foundation will then transfer ownership of the land to the city at a heavily discounted rate of about \$500 per acre, or about \$115,000. The city's money will come from donations, grants and local government support.

In the end, the cost to taxpayers comes to less than \$30,000.

Johnson credited the USDA for being a "significant player" in acquiring a permanent easement on the land. Other partners in the acquisition include: Lancaster County, Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, donors to the Lincoln Cares Program, Nebraska Environmental Trust and Friends of the Pioneers Park Nature Center.

"This is a tremendous deal to the City of Lincoln," Johnson said.