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A Unique Golf Course Partnership | Measuring Park Use | Parks and Rec's Economic Power

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Texas Park Sets Green Standard with Net Zero

By Denton Ragland

As one of the most sustainable parks in the nation, Evelyn's Park (<https://evelynspark.org/>), located in Bellaire, Texas, and just minutes away from downtown Houston, inspires the local community with a dynamic, sustainable green space. Surrounded by a sprawling urban landscape, Evelyn's Park is setting the green standard for parks across the United States.

Our park has been open for nearly a year, since Earth Day, April 22, 2017, and has made a name for itself by celebrating nature, enhancing the quality of life in the community and engaging families. The idea was to create a space that allows people to connect, not only to one another and their neighborhood, but also to their surroundings. To do this, park management dreamed of building a space the community could be proud of and that would inspire generations to come. The goal: to exemplify the very best in conservation by reaching “net zero” energy status for the park's day-to-day operations.

Benefits of Net Zero

Net zero design is not a new concept, but it has been growing in momentum as more people look toward the future and the sustainability of our urban environments. The idea is simple — a building becomes net zero when it generates the same amount of energy it consumes. Here are some of the many benefits to achieving net zero energy status:

- 1. It's good for the environment** – It's significant because it greatly decreases the need for fossil fuels, effectively reducing greenhouse gas emissions. A building's energy use is the largest single contributor to our carbon footprint

— 40 percent by some estimates — so there's a major opportunity to reduce our impact. By decreasing dependence on fossil fuels, we create a more resilient future for our children.

- 2. It's good for people** – Not only is net zero an ideal educational component for park programming, but it's also proven to inspire people and enhance quality of life. Net zero results in cleaner air and promotes healthier living.
- 3. It's good for business** – In addition to saving money in energy costs and over a building's equipment lifetime, net zero creates values for your business by improving property values, mitigating market risk and offering appealing tax incentives.

Although the concept behind net zero is simple, implementation requires thoughtful and strategic design, construction, operation and maintenance. To accomplish

The Children's Play Area at Evelyn's Park provides an imaginative play space for children, comfortable, shaded seating for parents and easy access to a lawn area suitable for a variety of communitywide events.

our goal, park management knew we needed to choose our business partners with purpose, selecting organizations that specialize in environmental responsibility.

Partners with Purpose

With the goal of net zero in mind, Evelyn's Park turned to Lake | Flato (www.lakeflato.com), a nationally recognized sustainable architecture firm, to design the park. Our desire for the park's office and event pavilion was to create something that incorporated the park's natural surroundings. Facilities were artfully crafted to merge with the landscape and include features that are functional, beautiful and environmentally responsible. Lighting fixtures that emulate tree branches, building siding and shade elements that serve as armatures for plantings, children's play areas incorporating original tree stumps and shade canopies from Texas Live Oaks are just some of the ways the park's structures seamlessly integrate authentic character into the landscape.

Once the design was in place, it was time to identify a sustainability partner that could make our net zero goal a reality. That's where the Green Mountain Energy Sun Club® (www.gmesunclub.org) came in. The organization's mission is to invest in nonprofits to advance sustainability for people and the planet. It does this by funding a wide variety of solar and sustainability projects, including those focused on renewable energy, energy efficiency and resource conservation. Evelyn's Park went to the Sun Club with the idea for a large solar array, and together with Lake | Flato, they designed a system for the park's office and event pavilion that would generate enough renewable energy for day-to-day operations.

Taking our vision to the next level, the Sun Club's expertise helped us create a sustainability solution that surpassed expectations. "In identifying rainwater capture and composting options, our team looked beyond the expected and delivered the exceptional," says Mark Parsons, president, Green Mountain Energy Sun Club.

With a donation of more than \$300,000 from the Sun Club, the park incorporated additional features, knowing that doing so would lead Evelyn's Park to become one of the most sustainable parks in the nation. When all systems are installed, by late 2018, the park will feature a total of 73 kilowatts of solar power, several on-site tumbler composters and a 20,000-gallon underground cistern that will capture a significant amount of rainwater, mitigating 40 percent of the park's overall water consumption.

Enhance Your Park

With a growing emphasis on nature and resource conservation in urban areas, existing and new parks nationwide are now prioritizing sustainability alongside accessibility and aesthetic ap-



Photo by Mariella Ayala

peal. From long-term, more extensive solutions, such as those featured at Evelyn's Park, to more simple and immediate improvements, reinforcing sustainability has a positive impact on the park, the community and the environment.

The first step to take when considering net zero or how to make your park more environmentally friendly is to identify strong partners, like the Sun Club, that focus on sustainability. The partners serve as trusted advisers that help bring your project to life, while providing valuable recommendations along the way that strengthen the environmental impact. As an advocate for net zero and park sustainability, Evelyn's Park hopes to inspire more parks to realize the benefit of being responsible stewards of our environment. 🌿

Denton Ragland is Executive Director of Evelyn's Park (denton.ragland@gmail.com).