

Ripples of revival in Fairmount Park



APRIL SAUL / Staff Photographer

Garden clubs are out to raise \$750,000 to restore Concourse Lake, a potential attraction between the Please Touch Museum and the Mann Center for the Performing Arts. At the lake are Jorie Nailor (left), who created a landscape plan, and Gene Dilks, head of the four-year project.

Volunteers see neglected lake as missing link

By Virginia A. Smith
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

To look at Concourse Lake now, you'd never believe what it used to be — or what it may be again.

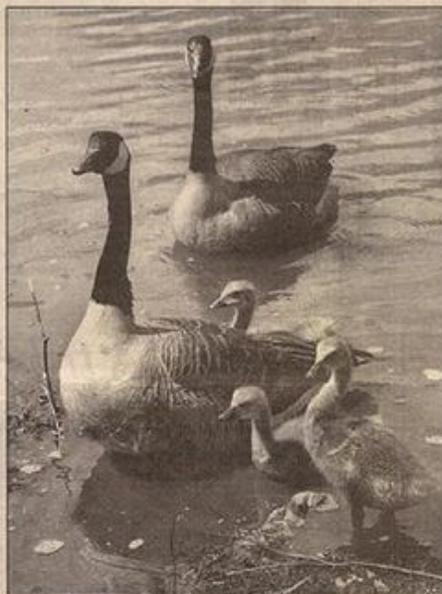
In its long-ago heyday, the 7½-acre lake in West Fairmount Park was a popular spot for fishing, picnicking, swimming, and ice-skating. But starting in the 1960s, it joined a sad list of Philadelphia treasures that were trashed by neglect or design. These days, it's a hot spot for Canada geese.

Now, as part of the city's long-term, \$300 million plan to revitalize West Fairmount Park and its institutions, the lake is poised for a come-

back — new landscaping and pathways, play and picnic areas, educational signs and small amphitheater, all underwritten by an unusual "angel."

Fourteen garden clubs in the Philadelphia area hope to raise \$750,000 to restore the lake in commemoration of the 100th birthday of their umbrella organization, the Garden Club of America. Founded in Philadelphia, GCA suggested that member clubs "do something with trees" for the centennial, which will be celebrated here in 2013.

"Concourse Lake is a hugely important historic site that's aesthetically See LAKE on B4



Canada geese dominate Concourse Lake these days. "We've been trying to get people excited about that lake for years," neighborhood leader Marjorie Ogilvie said.



This filtration pool at Concourse Lake helps clean the water on its way to the Schuylkill. Three pools were added and the lake was dredged in August, and now work will start on an eight-foot-wide asphalt path to take visitors on a loop around the lake and lawns.

Lake seen as a missing link

LAKE from B1
cally filled with potential. It could be absolutely gorgeous," said Gene Dilks, a lawyer and "fanatic gardener" from Chestnut Hill, who heads up the club's four-year lake project.

First, you have to find it. The lake is hidden behind an embankment along the Avenue of the Republic, formerly North Concourse Drive. But it's in a strategic place — 1.4 miles from the Philadelphia Zoo and a third of a mile, in each direction, from the Mann Center for the Performing Arts and the refurbished Please Touch Museum, formerly Memorial Hall.

Imagine the potential for visitors.

But some garden-club members were skeptical. "They said, 'You're out of your mind. This project's way too big,'" Dilks recalled as she showed a visitor around the spring-fed lake. "I guess I look at it and see how extraordinary this is."

And how extraordinary is this? Dilks had raised just \$38,000 in a year, including \$7,000 from the Yale Glee Club, until Friday, when two pledges totaling \$200,000 arrived. That's enough to start work on an asphalt pathway — eight feet wide for handicapped access — that will loop around the lake and lawns rather than hug the shore, as the current sidewalk does.

Work actually began in August when the Fairmount Park Conservancy had the lake dredged and three filtration pools added at one end to clean the water passing through on its way to the Schuylkill. The conservancy is spearheading the master plan for the area, which is



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named the Centennial District for the nation's Centennial Exhibition of 1876, which drew 10 million people to the park.

Back then, the Concourse Lake site — 14 acres in total — had Machinery Hall on it, a huge building that housed 2,260 exhibitors of cutting-edge technology and was the exhibition's most popular attraction. Three years later, the city created the storm-water reservoir that would become Concourse Lake.

Centennial Lake, which dates to 1876, still exists on the other side of the Avenue of the Republic. It's also on the city's redo list, but took a backseat when the all-volunteer garden clubs stepped forward for Concourse.

Their landscape plan, created by Jorie Nailor, an architect and landscape designer, features 139 native trees, such as redbud, flowering dogwood, and sweet bay magnolia, and 513 native shrubs, among them oakleaf hydrangea, dwarf fothergilla, and spice bush.

"It won't be lush. We can't afford to plant everything," said Nailor, a "passionate gardener" from Phoenixville, "but it will be beautiful."

The Fairmount Park Commission will retain responsibility for mowing and clean-up, but Dilks wants to raise enough money for an endowment and hopes a Friends of Concourse Lake group will step forward.

Katrina L. Wilhelm, executive director of the Fairmount Park Conservancy, imagines the restored lake ultimately serving not just as a secondary destination for visitors to the Mann or Please Touch, but also as a primary destination for neighbors, runners, bicyclists, and families.

"By re-creating this kind of natural area, you're going to connect the community back to this wonderful water source and create a wildlife habitat, as well as just make a pleasant place to be," Wilhelm said.

Marjorie Ogilvie, president of the Business Association of West Parkside, thinks the lake could be a boon to local

businesses and residents and an educational treasure for nearby Discovery Charter School.

"We've been trying to get people excited about that lake for years," she said, "and every step we take to make it beautiful and user-friendly brings people into the community."

Mike Pomerantz and his wife, Emily Beck, could well be among them someday. Longtime city dwellers, they recently moved to Westmont. But they still work in the city and often take advantage of its cultural and recreational offerings.

On Sunday, they completed a 5-kilometer walk along the Avenue of the Republic to raise money for ovarian cancer research. Although Concourse Lake was just across the street, beyond the embankment, they said they'd never heard of it and had no idea where it was.

"But if there were a concert here, we could make a whole day of it. That would be great if they fixed up the lake," Pomerantz said.

Not everyone is so enthusiastic. Vanessa Crenshaw of West Philadelphia's Carroll Park said Sunday that she walks her dog around the lake almost every day because it's quiet and private. "There's sort of a serenity about it," she said. "It'd be nice to keep it that way."

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