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## **MANSFIELD CELEBRATES GRAND OPENING OF ELMER W. OLIVER NATURE PARK**

MANSFIELD, Texas – Connecting with nature takes center stage in Mansfield as the city celebrates the grand opening of the most unique member of its award-winning parks system.

The 80-acre Elmer W. Oliver Nature Park will open to the public with a day of ceremonies, tours, special guest speakers and exhibits and nature activities for kids on Saturday, Jan. 25. The grand opening of the park, located at 1650 Matlock Road, will begin with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at 10 a.m. and activities for the public from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Guests will be shuttled to the park from Mansfield High School; no parking is available at the park site on opening day.

“Oliver Nature Park is a special place,” said Shelly Lanners, director of community services for the City of Mansfield. “We are excited for residents and visitors to experience the natural beauty of the park and have the opportunity to connect with nature.”

“It has been the vision of the City Council, the Mansfield Park Facilities Development Corporation and our city staff to provide residents with not only a different

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kind of park but one that offers educational opportunities for students in Mansfield and throughout the region,” said City Manager Clayton Chandler. “Oliver Nature Park does that and so much more.”

“This is the kind of park that will be a destination for residents and visitors,” said Mayor David Cook. “We will see families coming to this park to walk the trails and enjoy nature. Students will use this space as an outdoor classroom to discover the wonders of nature. The ways to enjoy this park are endless.”

The grand opening is for the first phase of Oliver Nature Park, which includes the park entrance, restroom facilities, picnic tables and benches and more than one mile of soft surface trails that wind through the park’s 80 acres.

“This is a different kind of park than most Mansfield residents are use to,” Lanners said. “There is no playground. There are no ball fields. The amenities here are natural elements that allow visitors to hike through prairie grass, enjoy wildflowers, watch birds and explore unique geological formations in the creek.”

Two areas of particular interest in the park is the Treehouse Overlook, a wooden deck that allows visitors to travel up into the canopy of the trees along the banks of Walnut Creek and view birds, squirrels and other wildlife; and the Rocky Ford, geological formations in the creek bed that formed millions of years ago and are visible from a deck along the creek.

The city has hired a nature education specialist who will provide programming for the park including guided tours, night hikes and plant and wildlife studies.

Construction of the second phase of the Oliver Nature Park development will begin next year and will tie the park into the Walnut Creek Linear Park trail system, extending the

12-foot wide concrete trail on the south side of the creek from the park to Joe Pool Lake. The third phase, scheduled for 2016-2018 is the addition of a nature education center and a treehouse learning lab. The approximately 10,000 square-foot nature center will include space for exhibits about the park and Mansfield history, as well as reception and meeting space. The learning lab is expected to be about 2,000 square feet and provide space for educational programs for all ages.

The acreage that comprises Elmer W. Oliver Nature Park not only offers a unique ecological representation of the region but a significant historical perspective for Mansfield. The property is at the intersection of the eastern Cross Timbers and Texas Blackland Prairie ecoregions, which contributes to the diverse plant and wildlife species featured in the park. Oliver Nature Park's role in the city's history is significant since the property was once the location of a major wagon trail transporting goods and people to the growing Mansfield community.

The park's namesake Elmer W. Oliver met and married Mansfield native Myrtle Fowler in 1925 and raised their three daughters in the area. In the 1960s they purchased property along Walnut Creek in Mansfield for a farm and gathering place for their growing family. The fields of wildflowers and prairie grass shaded by large pecan trees became a gathering place for their family that Oliver called "where roamings end." Following her parent's death, Marianne Oliver and her husband Kelly Williams purchased her sisters' shares of the property and the Williams family carried on the tradition of hosting special family gatherings on the property.

In 1995, the Mansfield Park Facilities Development Corporation received a land donation for use as a linear park from the residential developer building on the south side of

Walnut Creek, adjacent to the Williams property. Marianne Oliver Williams later approached the city about purchasing her property on the north side of the creek for a park where the natural beauty of the space would be maintained and education, appreciation and preservation would be its mission. An agreement was reached shortly before Mrs. Williams' death in November 2003, and the sale was finalized in 2004. The nature park was named for Elmer W. Oliver at the request of Kelly and Marianne Williams and their children, to honor the man known as "Pops" who first walked among the trees nestled by the creek bank and realized that this is where his "roamings end."