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Stream project reshapes Christiansburg's Depot Park

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Much of the 6-acre Depot Park, which was closed in November for a restoration project, has reopened to users extended trail network.

Photos by MATT GENTRY | The Roanoke Times

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CHRISTIANSBURG — All winter long heavy equipment has rolled over the grounds where last summer kids played soccer and clambered over swings and slides.

But late last week the machines again ceded ground to park users, when much of Depot Park reopened to walkers and games of hoops.

Construction is not finished, however. The \$520,000 upgrade, which features a reshaping of about 2,000 linear feet of Towne Branch, a tributary of the town's impaired Crab Creek, will continue for another couple of months.

The improvements have already had a big impact. Much of the stream had been enclosed by an overgrowth of brush and trees, and clearing and raising the stream bed have made it a more prominent feature of the park.

From a recreation perspective, the work "makes the park more aesthetically pleasing," Parks and Recreation Director Brad Epperley said. And that increases enjoyment. It may even increase usage in Depot, which has been increasing since 2012 when a first set of improvements were done, Epperley added.

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Construction in the 6-acre park is expected to be complete as early as May, town Civil Engineer Justin St. Clair said. Part of an existing asphalt walking trail that had to be removed for construction will soon be repaved.

The park closed in November for the work, which was undertaken to stop stream erosion and increase water quality of the creek that flows through Depot Park from Stone Street to the Aquatic Center. The Depot project is one of three such stream restorations completed by the town over the past couple of years, including in the Diamond Hills neighborhood and the Oak Tree subdivision.

Restoration is intended to slow down water flow during storms, when streams can erode their own banks and bottoms, and cause flooding issues for businesses and homes. Erosion has been a problem along Towne Branch, and the remediation uses natural materials — from native plants to structures made of stone and logs — to shore up stream banks and slow the water.

Towne Branch is a tributary of Crab Creek, which has been listed as impaired because of sediment pollution. Some work on the stream bank and seed and tree planting remain to be done in Depot, said Patricia Colatosti of the town's environmental programs office. Several species of native trees such as oak and hickory will be planted by mid-April, along with native grasses like big bluestem. Large stones shore up the stream bank and smaller stones have been used in the stream bed to oxygenate the water while reducing erosion. Colatosti said the hope is the work will attract fish into Towne Branch.

Part of the waterway has been rerouted and much of it has been raised, St. Clair said. Other parts of the bank have been reworked to have a more gentle slope and will be seeded with native grasses and flowering plants to keep the water cooler in the summer. Small wetland areas have also been created, or in some cases, uncovered. They coincide with a handful of fast-flowing springs that feed the stream.

Overall, the Towne Branch project is expected to reduce sediment and phosphorous pollution in Crab Creek by more than 300 tons a year, according to town figures. Half of the cost of the project will be paid for by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality Stormwater Local Assistance Fund. The rest will come from the town's new stormwater enterprise fund, officials have said.

To meet benchmarks for cleaning up Crab Creek, Christiansburg must reduce sediment flowing into the stream by about 50 percent, officials have said. Christiansburg has also been working to improve its storm drain system.

The project also is intended to improve pedestrian and bicycle access in the area. A culvert bridge and construction road have been installed at the far end of Depot near the town's skate park, replacing a muddy de facto trail that wound through brambles and stinging nettle. The road will serve as a temporary trail extension to better connect Depot to the Aquatic Center, St. Clair said.

A separate project funded through the Virginia Department of Transportation at an estimated \$440,600 is in the works and could begin next year and would create a permanent trail and other improvements.

According to the town's funding application, that project would install a 5-foot-wide concrete sidewalk, a 10-foot-wide asphalt trail and a 14-foot wide wood deck bridge over Towne Branch. This would better connect Depot Park to the Aquatic Center and the existing Mill Lane asphalt bike lane. Also, an 8-foot-wide asphalt trail extension would connect to an existing gravel trail that leads to the Kroger grocery store adjacent to the park.

By Tonia Moxley
