

Community laying foundation for Levitt Pavilion Houston

By Robin Foster | Posted: Wednesday, November 13, 2013 11:45 am

Southwest Houston residents are rolling up their sleeves to seat a board of directors and launch a \$10 million capital campaign to build the nation's eighth Levitt Pavilion at the 280-acre Willow Waterhole Conservation Reserve.

The Levitt model sets up a public-private partnership between the newly-formed Friends of Levitt Pavilion Houston, the city of Houston and the nonprofit Levitt Pavilions/Mortimer and Mimi Levitt Foundation to build and maintain a state-of-the-art outdoor music venue that will annually stage 50 concerts free to the public. Local leaders are hoping it can open as early as 2017.

“We like to say we are rebuilding American community life one concert at a time,” said Sharon Yazowski, executive director of Levitt Pavilions, during Tuesday's announcement about the partnership at a community breakfast at Houston Baptist University.

Six existing Levitt venues, in cities including Arlington, Los Angeles, Memphis and Westport, CT, make up the only national network of outdoor amphitheaters that offer free concerts, Yazowski said. A seventh is currently being built in Denver.

Willow Waterhole was selected a year ago as the Houston site through a competitive process. Area stakeholders that lobbied for it include the Brays Oaks Management District, the Willow Waterhole Greenspace Conservancy, local civic clubs and regional nonprofits such as Southwest Houston 2000.

Yazowski said the Levitt model seeks out under-used outdoor areas that can be transformed into citywide destinations.

“The more we learned about Willow Waterhole it became clear we'd be at this site,” she said, adding that a Levitt Pavilion can be a springboard for revitalization.

“This is a part of Houston that doesn't have these cultural offerings nearby,” she said.

Under the partnership, the Levitt Foundation provides seed money and annual operating grants to the local nonprofit as well as technical and other support. The city of Houston will own the facility and have a role in building the new venue and maintaining the structure and grounds.

A pavilion is part of the master plan for Willow Waterhole, said Howard Sacks, WWGC's former president who is now chairing the Friends of Levitt Houston. Working with local partners, WWGC has been organizing outdoor musical events at the site for the past five years, he noted. The next Music in the

Park event, by a student band assembled by Al Campbell, will be from 4-6 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 17.

When he learned of the Levitt Foundation's interest in a Houston location in July 2012, Sacks said, "My energy was off the charts -- explosive. I could barely sit still."

"I think it's a great facility for southwest Houston and all of Houston," said Truett Latimer, who attended Tuesday's announcement. "I expect the concept to be embraced strongly by the community and the city."