

Welcome to the Forest

AMY WELLINGTON, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

I HAD THE PRIVILEGE RECENTLY to participate in the unveiling of Crawford County's newest community forest, the Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) Community Forest, located 1 mile south of Cambridge Springs on Route 86. The Foundation for Sustainable Forests purchased this land from Northwestern REC earlier this year with a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service Community Forest Program.

When I first started at Northwestern REC 23 years ago, this land had been earmarked as a business and industrial park. On this chunk of land, the cooperative built its current headquarters. Years later, the cooperative used some of the land to create the beautiful residential space across Route 86, known as Pleasant Hills. Some of the land was also sold to Cambridge Township. The co-op knew it wanted to do something different with the remaining land —

something it hadn't already done.

After many discussions, the co-op's board of directors decided to turn the leftover land into a Keystone Opportunity Zone (KOZ), which would become known as the Cambridge Business Center. There were other KOZ's popping up across the region back then, and it really made the most sense at the time. One of my first tasks as a new employee was to photograph the construction progress of the park.

Yes, I was the lucky newbie who was strapped into the bucket of one of our trucks and hoisted into the air to snap some photos. Because I was so new, I figured the lineman operating the boom from below would take it easy on me. But, of course, he didn't. He extended the boom as far as it could go. And although he denies it to this day, I swear he rocked the bucket.

Can you imagine how difficult it was to take photos with one hand while hanging on for dear life with the other? To the left is one of the photos I took that day as I was hunkered down in the bucket. I think you can see the smirk on the lineman's face! They have drones now for this type of thing.

All joking aside, some companies asked about space at the park over

the years, but nothing ever came to fruition. And while we waited for a prospective commercial buyer, many residents and co-op employees used the space to hike or walk their dogs and even hunt. The co-op has also used the space multiple times for chainsaw safety training and will continue to do so in the future. When I was 20 years younger, I used to roller blade back and forth on Wenner Drive as well.

It is such a great outdoor space.

You see, this land was destined to become something better suited for this community. Something the community has been using it for all along ... and that is a beautiful, interactive piece of land for everyone to enjoy.

Northwestern REC is proud to partner with the foundation in this endeavor. It has already timbered the land for sustainability, built a new trail and erected several bat houses. We encourage you to visit the new forest, where you are guaranteed to encounter beautiful things, such as a galivanting grey squirrel, a vocal chickadee and other wildlife.

For more information, please visit foundationforsustainableforests.org.



FOREST THROUGH THE TREES: Troy Firth, center, director for the Foundation for Sustainable Forests, talks to a crowd of supporters at the unveiling of the Northwestern REC Community Forest in September.