

RENOVATION

Aquarena Center

By Jaime Kilpatrick

The natural beauty that has attracted visitors to Spring Lake throughout San Marcos' history is about to come full circle.

Aquarena Center, located on the banks of the lake and the headwaters of the San Marcos River, is expected to undergo demolition this month after years of planning and coordination between its owner, Texas State University, and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Ron Coley, director of Aquarena Center, said the process has taken several years because of the sensitivity of federally protected plant and animal species and archeological findings in the lake and river.

"This is not an overnight decision," Coley said. "We're 10 years into the plan, but given the value of what it is that we're dealing with here, we needed 10 years to make it. This is nothing anyone has taken lightly or done casually."

The site has had many incarnations since Gen. Edward Burleson constructed the dam that created Spring Lake in 1851. Business owner A.B. Rogers bought the land in 1926 and built Spring Lake Hotel, now home to the Texas Rivers Center, in 1928. His son, Paul Rogers, purchased the land from him in 1949 and created Aquarena Springs, a tourist destination that attracted visitors for decades. Texas

State University purchased the property in 1994 and changed its focus from entertainment to preservation and education.

The Spring Lake Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration Project calls for the removal of all man-made structures built while Aquarena Springs was an amusement park.

The corps will be removing asphalt walkways, buildings and remnants of the former attractions, including the submerged theater that featured underwater performances, the Alpine Swiss sky ride and the gift shop. The large flower sculptures at the sky ride's former landing pad created by local artist Buck Winn will be salvaged and stored until the university can find a home for them, said Juan Guerra, vice president of facilities at Texas State.

After the structures are removed, native grassland will be restored on the peninsula, and a vegetative buffer zone will be put in place between the Texas State golf course and Spring Lake.

The corps expects to award the construction contract at the end of June and have the contractors start working in July with a six-month timeline to completion, Guerra said. The total project cost is estimated at \$2.5 million with the university and the corps sharing the cost.

A new welcome center is being



Photos by Ashley Landis

The landing pad of the former Swiss Sky Ride will be removed during the demolition this summer.

constructed in Aquarena's Pecan Grove picnic area to accommodate visitors during and after the demolition.

Aquarena Center Assistant Director Deborah Lane said although the structures from its former life played an important role in its history, she believes visitors are attracted for the peaceful atmosphere, not the buildings.

"I think that's what draws people here," she said. "You can have fun, you can play, you can laugh, you can just chill out, you can do whatever. And I think that's all going to be here without these physical structures."

Area History

- 1851: Gen. Edward Burleson built the dam that created Spring Lake
- 1928: A.B. Rogers built Aquarena Inn
- 1951: First underwater theater
- 1969: Ralph the Swimming Pig debuts
- 1994: Texas State University buys site
- 2011: Restoration scheduled to begin



Glass-bottom boats

The glass-bottom boats—one of Aquarena's most famous attractions since they were first launched in 1946—will remain in place for visitors to tour the San Marcos Springs from the water's surface.

The 30-minute boat tours cost \$9 (adults), \$7.50 (age 60 and older), \$6 (ages 4–15) and are free for children 3 and younger.

Aquarena also offers glass-bottom kayak tours. One-hour tours are \$20. Three-hour tours are \$40 (adults), \$30 (military, age 55 and older and children ages 6–18) and \$20 (Texas State students, faculty and staff). Tours must be booked 72 hours in advance.

Highlights of the tours include native plant and animal species, an underwater archeological dig site and artesian springs.



Glass-bottom boats offer visitors an up-close view of the environment below Spring Lake's surface.

Education

Aquarena Center hosts guided school field trips and private tours for students and visitors of all ages.

The Diving for Science program allows certified scuba divers to participate in educational, research and conservation projects in Spring Lake.


The Center has annual Earth Day events and hosts local groups to celebrate Summer and Winter solstices.

Aquarena Center also features activities and attractions that are free to visitors:

- Wetlands Boardwalk
- Aquarium featuring the Endangered Species exhibit
- Texas Rivers Center Exhibit Gallery



Aquarena Center hosts field trips for students, such as these from Morill Elementary in San Antonio.



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