

HISTORY'S FUTURE

MEGAN LOVETT — THE DAILY PROGRESS



Alexandria Searls, executive director of the Lewis & Clark Exploratory Center of Virginia, touts the center's new facility, which will

be built near the Rivanna River in Darden Towe Park. She said it will "showcase the beauties we have here in our backyard."

With a focus on fun, Lewis & Clark center to explore U.S.'s past

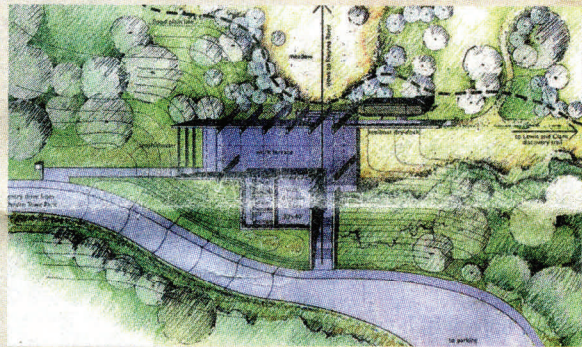
By Sharon C. Fitzgerald
Daily Progress correspondent

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark started their historic journey west in 1804, they carried with them a handful of people and a dream to explore uncharted territory.

Now final plans are being made for a center in Albemarle County that will showcase the history of the famous expedition while providing a way for people young and old to celebrate and explore their own surroundings.

"The Lewis & Clark Exploratory Center of Virginia will celebrate the original ideas and roots of the Lewis and Clark expedition," said Alexandria Searls, executive director of the center. "It will also showcase the beauties we have here in our backyard."

The new, 2,500-square-foot building will be located in the back of Darden Towe Park and over-



A conceptual drawing of the Lewis & Clark Exploratory Center.

look the Rivanna River. Fundraising for the estimated \$1.3 million center is almost complete and construction is slated to begin in November, Searls said.

"We want to be a place where people can see the hard work that went into building the United States but have fun while doing it," Searls said.

The building will have an exhibit hall, a library, classrooms and meeting space. Visitors will be able to see full-size replicas of a keelboat and smaller boats similar to those used during the Lewis and Clark trip. The boats were built by children and volunteers in the years since the center was formed.

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"We have the only keelboat that I know of on the East Coast," Searls said.

The idea to construct a local center started more than 10 years ago when a group of locals wanted to recognize Thomas Jefferson's support and efforts of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Searls said. Lewis was a native of Albemarle and Clark had family ties to the area.

The program currently runs out of an office in the Albemarle County Office Building and holds programs for the public out of a small barn at Darden Towe Park. Classes are taught outside or inside an old, discarded barn that has been turned into several classrooms.

"It will be nice to have running water because right now I don't even have that," Searls said.

Throughout the spring and summer, Searls and seasonal staff teach children about everything from kayaking to mask making.

Once the center opens, Searls hopes it will be a tourist draw for people visiting Monticello, as well

as continue to serve children in the community and state.

"We have schoolchildren, community groups and home-schooled children that come to our classes," Searls said. "Most of the schools have beautiful locations but no place where they can hike and be out in nature. We want to provide that love of nature."

The group has raised \$1.2 million through private and state funds and hopes to raise another \$100,000 before breaking ground later this year.

"This has been a project long in the making," said county Supervisor and center board member Rodney S. Thomas. "I pat [organizers] on the backs for persevering and getting through the [fundraising and site approval] process."

Thomas was approved as a member of the board earlier this year.

The center recently received a \$200,000 enhancement grant through the Virginia Department of Transportation as part of its transportation enhancement program. It is the fourth VDOT grant the center has received in recent years and part of \$21.9 million awarded to

projects throughout the state this year.

"These transportation enhancement grants allow Virginia to enhance its rich history, educate our citizens and visitors and enhance the quality of life for all who call Virginia home," said Sean Connaughton, secretary of transportation, in a news release.

After the center is open, the group hopes to raise the money for a ferry that will transport visitors from Darden Towe Park to Pen Park via the Rivanna, Searls said.

Later this year, Searls plans to visit the Lewis and Clark Boat House and Nature Center in St. Charles, Mo., to learn about the establishment and build a relationship with its staff.

Although the trek started in Missouri and not Virginia, Thomas said there is a lot of history here that needs to be preserved and celebrated.

"This is where the whole thing started," Thomas said. "I've been to a center in Missouri and their place is immaculate. We're just catching up and, hopefully, we'll have a center that will be just as informative as the other centers in the country."