

# Scouting a new site



by **MATT PATTERSON**

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The Girl Scout Urban Camp and STEM Center's main building will double as a dormitory. Photo provided by Rees Associates, Inc.

But the trip was far from Thomson's only motivation. She also was working for her future and the future of scouts that will come long after her. Those same cookie sales, along with money from community partners and donors, are helping pay for construction and operation of a new \$11.2 million scout camp on the edge of Zoo Lake in northeast Oklahoma City.

"I love being able to sit around the campfire and tell stories and sing songs," Thomson said.

Those activities have been in short supply since late last year when Camp Cookieland, a home for Girl Scout outdoor programs for more than a half-century near Harrah in eastern Oklahoma County, got gobbled up by a turnpike project.

Since then, makeshift programs have been held in an office building on Broadway Extension that also serves as headquarters for Girl Scouts Western Oklahoma.

"We operated a day camp out of this building," CEO Shannon Evers said. "But it wasn't really designed for that. The girls want to run around outside and do tie-dye T-shirts and STEM activities and we're in a building that backs up to a freeway."

The building is far from ideal for scouting programs, but still provided two weeks of programming during the April teacher walkout and hosted a few sleepovers.

“We’re spending a lot of our time coming up with workaround plans rather than being efficient and planning our programming for girls so they have a quality experience,” Evers said.

## **Change is in the air**

Situated on 14 acres on the eastern shore of Zoo Lake, the Girl Scout Urban Camp and STEM Center is firmly within Oklahoma City's borders, but feels isolated amid a canopy of trees. It may not be wilderness, but it feels like it.

“We looked at eight sites and this one was by far the best,” said Steve Mason, an Oklahoma City developer who also serves on the Girl Scouts Western Oklahoma board. “We wanted to be in the core, yet be able to provide outdoor programming. The beautiful thing about this topography are the trees and red sandstone outcrops. You don't feel like you're in the city.”

The facility, if approved by the Oklahoma City Council, will include a zip-line tower, primitive campsites, a pool, amphitheater, outdoor cooking pavilion, tree house and a main building that will double as a dormitory. The property neighbors the zoo and Science Museum Oklahoma, which opens up programming possibilities, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, fields the Girl Scouts have committed to getting 2.5 million girls into by 2025.

“It's the outdoors meets STEM,” Evers said. “It's a game-changer for our organization and for the state because we will be able to do a lot of programming and get girls outdoors while teaching them about science. Being close to the zoo and Science Museum ups the ante in an incredible way to allow us to give the girls an experience they wouldn't normally have.”

But perhaps most importantly, it's accessible. About 60 percent of girls served by Girl Scouts Western Oklahoma come from low-income families, many of them living in Oklahoma City.

“When people think of Girl Scouts, they often have a stereotype of middle-class girls with a group of 10 kids and two adult troop leaders,” Evers said. “That's not the case for us. We serve girls in detention centers, foster care and public housing sites. We spend a lot of time making sure the girls who have those challenges in their lives have access to scouting.”

Camp Cookieland fell well short of that mark. Beloved by generations of girls who camped there, it is now a memory. The scouts held a closing ceremony for it last year, but in some ways it is symbolic of a fading concept. Modern camps have to be versatile.

“We could have built a 100-acre camp in Okemah or Weatherford, 100 acres of Oklahoma farmland doesn't cost much,” Mason said. “But it would have been flat, and probably without trees or a lake. We would have had to build the entire programming infrastructure from scratch. With this, we're staying in the city and taking advantage of infrastructure already in place at the zoo and Science Museum Oklahoma.”

The new camp also serves a need for the zoo. The often-littered site requires monitoring by the zoo's security staff. When the zoo created an exhibit to show the effect of trash on the environment, it pulled much of the material used in the display from the lake itself. As part of their agreement with the scouts, the zoo will retain control over half the 28-acre site, while leasing the other half to the scouts for \$1 per year.

The zoo had its own plans to develop the site, but those plans are at least a decade away.

“It's a beautiful spot and, from what I understand, if you go back in time it used to be popular for family picnics and reunions, but nobody really uses it anymore,” Oklahoma City Zoo executive director Dwight Lawson said. “There's a handful of people that fish there at the lake. But it's more of a liability than an asset.”

## **A camp that pays for itself?**

The 14-acre site will be used by thousands of Girl Scouts each year, and when it's not being used by Scouts, the organization hopes it will be used by companies and other organizations.

To that end, much of the camp has been designed so that it can be used by people of all ages. Even the dorm-style sleeping in the main building can be converted to accommodate two to four people for more privacy. Up to 10,000 people are expected to use the camp each year, including those from outside groups renting the space for their own functions.

“The beautiful thing about our financial model is we break even using the camp half the time,” Mason said. “The other half it will make money to pay for Girl Scout programming elsewhere. It can be used for church and company retreats. The only dilemma we had was creating a bed situation that would work for a 12-year-old girl and 58-year-olds.”

The scouts themselves were heavily involved in the design process.

“We challenged them to come up with solutions,” Evers said. “We wanted flexible spaces. Bunk rooms that could sleep eight, or two to four people. We've had two girls sit on the property task force committee and they've come up with some creative solutions that challenged the architects.”

Lilly Thomson's mother, Tracey, has enjoyed watching her daughter, and other girls take part in the process.

“She's learned a lot as far as working with contractors and developers,” Tracey Thomson said. “She's seen things from an outside perspective as opposed to just showing up at camp. I think it's going to be state of the art, totally different than anything we've seen before. A lot of things at this camp haven't been available on this scale before.”

Groundbreaking is slated for early next year, with completion expected in the summer of 2020. Girl Scouts Western Oklahoma is in the middle of a capital campaign for the project. The organization netted about \$3.2 million from the sale of Camp Cookieland. That camp was paid for by girls who sold cookies decades ago, and since the camp was owned by the scouts, it will make the girls the largest donor to the campaign, which will give them naming rights.

“Girls that are now women in their 60s, who collectively sold cookies to buy a camp, are our largest donors and these kids are carrying on that legacy,” Mason said. “It's a sweet story.”



**MATT PATTERSON**

Matt Patterson has been with The Oklahoman since 2006. Prior to joining the news staff in 2010, Patterson worked in The Oklahoman's sports department for five years. He previously worked at The Lawton Constitution and The Edmond Sun....

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