

Nature's playground comes to life in Houston

Posted: Friday, October 4, 2013 10:02 am | Updated: 10:03 am, Fri Oct 4, 2013.

John Weiss, weiss@postbulletin.com

HOUSTON — Much to Karla Bloem's surprise, children love playing with bales of hay on the new Natural Playground at the [Houston Nature Center](#).

The center's naturalist/director thought the boulders might be more of a child magnet, but that's part of the reason for the playground — to be a place where children can follow their whims, be creative, see what challenges them, Bloem said.

The playground, designed by the Natural Playgrounds Company in Concord, NH, officially opened Sept. 7 with people zipping down a slide and breaking a ribbon.

Other key parts of the design are several rings of stumps where children can hop from stump to stump, a stone tunnel, a concrete owl that's 4-feet-tall, trees, and a water pump they can use to pump water down a wooden sluice.

Nearly all materials are natural, such as wood, boulders, limestone slabs, and dirt.

It cost about \$110,000 but many people donated more than 500 hours to put it together, she said. Much of the money came from private donations as well as a Statewide Health Improvement Program grant for planning, a Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council grant for the owl sculpture, and a Minnesota Community Forest Bonding Grant for 44 large trees.



A four-foot-tall concrete owl with three eggs is part of the art component at the Natural Playground.

"Everybody loves it, including adults," Bloem said. The hay bales are the surprise success, though they do tend to fall apart easily. They are also easy to replace!

The idea behind building that playground instead of a more traditional one with swings, regular slides, and monkey bars is that children need to get in touch with nature and natural materials, she said.

Most adults think children are addicted to electronic devices, but a study by Children's Play Council found "86 percent of children prefer outdoor activities, including playing out with their friends, building dens and getting muddy, to playing computer games." Nearly three in four children would like to play outside more often, she said.

Play in a natural setting is also healthier because there are no swings or monkey bars to fall from, she said. They have room to run and slide, and for their minds to roam, Bloem said.

The playground is also a key part in the success of the International Owl Center she wants to build on the site. The center has put out a request for proposals for pre-design work to get a basic concept of what it will look like and how much it would cost, Bloem said.

The center has received a donation to do that work, she said.

To contact the Natural Playgrounds Company

info@naturalplaygrounds.com

www.naturalplaygrounds.com

888-290-8405