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By Kristen Coppock Staff writer

Nature center moves forward with a Sip and Supper

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Scott Anderson

The Rancocas Nature Center will be the beneficiary of proceeds from the Sips & Supper fundraiser on Sunday at Historic Smithville Park in Eastampton



Mother Nature has some good friends in Westampton, and they're offering wine and dinner to draw in more potential supporters of a local environmental site.

Friends of the Rancocas Nature Center will host the Sips and Supper fundraiser Sunday, 4-7 p.m. Held at Historic Smithville Park in Eastampton, the event pairs artisan beers produced by Flying Fish Brewery in Somerdale with food from Catering by Phillip in Burlington Township. Music will be provided by DJ David Starr.

The event is an opportunity for the Friends to show the public what the 210-acre center on Rancocas Road has to offer, including nature trails. The main building houses a gift shop, natural history displays, restrooms and some live animals. Outdoors, the property features a picnic area, ponds, beehives and a pollinator and display gardens created by the Master Gardeners of Burlington County.

The center also features various natural habitats, such as meadows, forest and wetlands. Toni Price, co-chair of FRNC, said the combination of those habitats in one place is truly unique to the area.

The nature center opened in 1976 and was operated for years by the New Jersey Audubon Society. In late 2012, the society announced it was closing the site, due to budget constraints. It remained under the Audubon umbrella until April of last year, when the newly formed Friends assumed responsibility for keeping the center viable.

A property of the NJ State Park Service under the Division of Parks and Forestry, the center also is supported in part by the Burlington County Freeholders, Westampton Township and the Rancocas Conservancy.

Price said Sunday's event is partly a celebration of the center's success in moving forward. "We are excited to show our supporters and potential new members all that we've accomplished since our independence from NJ Audubon last year," Price said. "We are growing, and we're looking to the future."

According to FRNC Co-Chair Rich Chichester, a presentation about what's ahead for the center will be made during the event.

"Our presentation will include our future plans, potential new research and how we plan to include both the sociological and environmental history of this site within our many nature programs," he said.

Among the new developments, Price said, is a mission to incorporate the site's history, which predates the American Revolution. Among the people who once inhabited the land are Native Americans, Quakers and African American farmers. Adjacent to the property in Westampton is Timbuctoo, a 19th-century black settlement being studied by historians and archeologists.

“There were people here, and they interacted with the environment,” said Price. “Our goal is to learn more about those people and how they interacted with the plants and animals.”

Proceeds from the fundraiser will support operation of the center and its programs.

The meal, according to Chichester, will include Carolina Pulled Pork, Buttermilk Fried Chicken, a house salad, Five Grain California Pilaf, Penne Primavera with Roasted Vegetables, and cake. Trays of fruit, cheese, snacks and dessert also will be served.

“People who shopped at the Burlington County Farmers Market this summer will be familiar with Catering by Phillip’s fresh seasonal food,” said Chichester.

Beer samples will be provided by Flying Fish Brewery with full pours available at the bar. Other beverages include coffee, tea and water.

Tickets are \$40 per adult. They can be purchased by calling the center at 609-261-2495 or at its on-site gift shop, open Tuesday-Sunday. Sponsor and donation opportunities also are available.

For more information, call the center or email info@rancocasnaturecenter.org.

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