

Bridging Communities

The eagerly awaited John Laurie Pedestrian Overpass from Brentwood Heights to Nose Hill Park is truly underway, to finally allow safe passage between this suburban community and the natural grassland ecosystem on our doorstep.

As well as the engineering and construction aspects, careful thought is being directed toward the environmental, landscaping, naming, and public art components of this structure. The artistic elements incorporated into the bridge structure represent the fifth piece of public art made possible through The City of Calgary's Public Art Program. Please visit: www.calgary.ca/publicart.

What's in a Name?

By naming we offer an act of faith that the park's unique ecosystem will be preserved.
–President, Friends of Nose Hill

In that the Dr. E.W. Coffin Elementary School Community has been actively interested in the realization of this overpass for many years, the school has submitted several name suggestions for this new overpass near Brisebois Drive NW. As the Calgary school located closest to the bridge location, and with numerous curricular studies located within Nose Hill Park, the students feel a particular connection to this project.

When newly elected Alderman Druh Farrell visited the school several years ago, students asked her about a possible overpass at that time. This visit was followed up with students writing letters to the City to let them know how much they'd appreciate safe walking access to the park directly from the school.

In 1995, Dr. Coffin School adopted the small natural area park adjacent to the west side of the school grounds through the city's Adopt-A-Park program. This park is an outlier of Nose Hill and consists of the same fescue grassland and aspen parkland habitat. A school wide contest was held to name that park, and the winning submission chosen by the students was *Whispering Woods*.

For 10 years now, Dr. Coffin has been working closely with the city's Parks and Natural Areas departments in stewardship and restoration activities within *Whispering Woods*. Last June, we together created the *Prairie Amphitheatre*, a sandstone seating area within *Whispering Woods*, and began the creation of an adjacent reclaimed prairie space within the school grounds known as our *Centennial Natureground*. The Dr. Coffin community is becoming well known for its integral environmental program, its Earth School status with the national SEEDS Foundation, and its many outreach activities within the community. As such, the school has recently been nominated for the 2005 provincial Emerald Award for Environmental Excellence by Sonia Gonsalves, Volunteer Administrator with The City of Calgary Natural Areas department.

Thus it has been a natural segue for the students at Dr. Coffin to once again participate in the naming process of an important feature of their community. Recently, all classes have been walking weekly to the bridge site to sketch the construction activities. We borrowed the architect's model [Figure 1], and received some of the engineering drawings, via Jadwiga Kroman of Transportation Infrastructure, to show the students.

As well as putting out a call to the community for name suggestions through the *Brentwood Bugle*, we have liaised with the Brentwood Community Association [BCA] regarding the school's desire to participate in the naming process.

In March we initiated a schoolwide contest for name suggestions, receiving dozens of ideas. On April 4th and 11th, I participated as an advisor in the adjudication of the public art component of the bridge with Bruce Fraser, one of three panel jurors and the representative from the BCA. Participating in the jury deliberations and then meeting the selected artist to ask questions and provide feedback, was an insightful and affirming experience, and it allowed for a valuable focus for narrowing the list of possible names.

Subsequently, each of the 8 classes at Dr. Coffin School participated in discussion and voting sessions on the 5 name finalists. The students were also required to provide reasons for their preferences. The overwhelming school favorite was ***Whispering Grasses Walkway***, submitted by a Grade 6 student. The following are quotes from the Grades K-6 students themselves, regarding their voting rationale: 1) *Whispering Grasses sounds peaceful, and the grasses seem to be whispering to each other.* 2) *The imagery is calm and silent; it makes you want to explore.* 3) *It makes you think of the smell of fresh grass and the color green.* 4) *It ties in to our Whispering Woods nearby.* 5) *Grass is plentiful on Nose Hill.* 6) *The grass whispers when the wind blows through it.*

As well as being the school favorite, it is felt that this name is the best fit for the intended public artwork which will be displayed at each end of the bridge [Figure 2]. Thus the sleek and simple bridge design which follows Nose Hill's natural contours, the creative legacy of the proposed art which will be comprised of four curved metal panels depicting aspects of the ecosystem, and the evocative name of the overpass would all work together to honor the terrain, the flora and fauna, and the sense of wide open space experienced within Nose Hill's special grassland habitat, which is ours to protect, right here in our urban midst.

The other four name finalists, listed alphabetically, included the following themes: *Crocus Hill*, *Many Owls*, *Prairie* and *Wild Rose*. These names received about equal support, and about half that of our first choice. The compelling *Prairie* and *Wild Rose* themes are ubiquitous in Calgary, thus the Dr. Coffin Environment Committee offered the other three names to address the uniqueness of this new bridge and its art. The City's Naming Committee will evaluate these names and any others submitted, and refer them to further committees before a final decision is reached by City Council.

The ***Many Owls*** theme received entry variations from three Grade 1 & 2 students, as well as a community member, and this was the class favorite of the Kindergarten students. This name speaks directly to the bridge's specific geographic location as it enters Nose Hill Park by Many Owls Valley, and is a name which many members of the wider community can readily relate to.

The ***Crocus Hill*** theme makes you '*think of spring and think positively*,' '*crocuses are common*' and '*the first flowers to bloom on Nose Hill each year*,' reflected various students. Many locals think Nose Hill & crocuses to be effectively synonymous, especially at this time of year.

If you would like to provide feedback on any of these three name suggestions, please do contact me, as below. Visit the City's website [search John Laurie Pedestrian Overpass] for progress photos, FAQs, and more details on the public art component. By involving so many in the process, we are together building in ownership for the continued stewardship of our very special park.

The two curved bridge spans are scheduled to be rotated, one at a time, in late April and early May. Enjoy this Merry Month of May, especially the 100th anniversary of Arbor Day on the 11th, and June will bring us details of the next Brentwood Community Mural, and the Grassroots Northland Farmers' Market once again for Truly Fresh Tuesdays.

Environmentally yours,
Polly Lee Knowlton Cockett
282-2014 or plknowlton.cockett@shaw.ca

Figure 1 Architect's Model



Figure 2 Public Art details for the Overpass
http://www.calgary.ca/docgallery/bu/recreation/public_art/info_package.pdf

