



**Contractor List for
Bellaboo's at Three
Rivers County Park**

→	<i>Construction Manager</i>
	Tonn & Blank, Inc.
→	<i>General Contractor</i>
	R.A. Snemis Construction Co.
→	<i>Sitework</i>
	Delta III, Inc.
→	<i>Dewatering</i>
	Delta III, Inc.
→	<i>Masonry</i>
	R.A. Snemis Construction Co.
→	<i>Insulation & Roofing</i>
	R.A. Snemis Construction Co.
→	<i>Glass & Glazing</i>
	Trout Glass & Mirror
→	<i>Doors & Windows</i>
	R.A. Snemis Construction Co.
→	<i>Plumbing</i>
	Mechanical Concepts, Inc.
→	<i>HVAC</i>
	Mechanical Concepts, Inc.
→	<i>Electrical</i>
	Sweney Electric Company, Inc.
→	<i>Lighting Supplier</i>
	Graybar Electric Company, Inc.
→	<i>Drywall</i>
	R.A. Snemis Construction Co.
→	<i>Fire Sprinkler System</i>
	Shambaugh & Sons, LP
→	<i>Painting</i>
	Stan's Painting & Decorating
→	<i>Fire Alarm System</i>
	Sweney Electric Company, Inc.
→	<i>Asphalt Paving</i>
	Rieth-Riley Construction Co., Inc. Walsh & Kelly, Inc.
→	<i>Concrete Curbs & Sidewalks</i>
	Doug & Steve's Concrete

Not Your Typical Playland

Any more it seems as if kids at an earlier age are attached to computers, gameboys and other electronic toy devices that provide entertainment, and some educational value. But the \$9.5 billion computer and video game industry to a large extent is centered on the child forming a relationship with the electronic mechanism. Being a kid, though, means learning about the world around you through means other than a machine run on electricity or batteries. Researchers indicate children gain an understanding about the world by using their senses and social interaction.

The Lake County Parks and Recreation Department may have figured out a way to help small children build a greater awareness of the world they live in. The parks department is capitalizing on a concept known as “edutainment,” a form of entertainment designed to educate and amuse. Bellaboo’s, a children’s play and discovery center, opening this summer, is a one of a kind facility located in Three Rivers County Park in Lake County. Bellaboo’s will operate seven days a week, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission hasn’t been determined.

The only well-known facilities comparable

to it are the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis and the Crown Family Play Lab at The Field Museum in Chicago. Still, both of those facilities are unlike the uniqueness that Bellaboo’s offers. Geared exclusively toward children from infancy through age eight, Bellaboo’s provides a range of hands-on activities, including a pretend restaurant and an art studio, helping stimulate intellectual growth, build motor skills and enhance social capabilities. Additionally, the facility features an outdoor element in which kids will learn about the environment thanks to a nearby lake.

Learn thru Play

At its foundation, Bellaboo’s wants children to learn through play. Research has shown that playing is a natural way for children to learn because it utilizes all senses. According to published reports, playtime is a cognitive learning exercise where children practice taking in information and organizing it to solve problems and understand their environment.

According to the Canadian Child Care Foundation, there are many links between play and learning:



Children's Cooking Area

- Play nurtures children's creativity and problem solving capabilities
- Play stimulates the healthy development of children's brains
- Play builds children's strength and aids in emotional health
- Play allows children to acquire competence and skills that make them feel good about themselves
- Play provides the context in which children learn how to behave, how to treat others and social conventions
- Play permits opportunities to learn how to share and to cooperate

These elements collectively form the foundation for early childhood learning and prepare them to enter a school setting,

and these building blocks make up the cornerstone of Bellaboo's. Many of the facility's activities and programs are unstructured and allow children to learn through self-directed play. Whether it's a building block play room or a pretend supermarket, the children build motor, mental and social skills, along with becoming better acquainted with real world activities by experiencing them at their level.

The 23,000-square-foot facility (2600 Nevada St., Lake Station) features self-directed play combined with adult-guided programs that allows kids to explore, create and interact. Being that there is no such facility like Bellaboo's in northern Indiana, officials expect it to be a considerable draw.



Cafe



Water Room

The park department is projecting 250,000 visitors annually, said Jim Basala, Superintendent of Business Development at Lake County Parks and Recreation Department.

"I think we've got something here," Basala said. "We get them in here once, knock their socks off with how cool it is and then we'll get repeat business."

Self-Sufficient

Interestingly, Bellaboo's is the country's first admission-based children's discovery play center developed by a public parks department. The idea behind Bellaboo's was born out of planning sessions

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more than six years ago. The project was part of a \$30 million bond issue that included the expansion of Deep River Waterpark and the acquisition of Cedar Creek Family Golf Center.

Rather than relying heavily on tax dollars to support its programs, the Lake County Parks and Recreation Department has been increasingly focused on developing projects and programs that generate revenue for the park system.

“We don’t rely 100 percent on taxes, so if we want to do more, we have to find ways to do it other than tax dollars,” Basala said. “We’ll develop things that are revenue producers where it makes sense.”

Lake County park officials examined and evaluated existing park facilities in connection with community recreational needs and determined that small children were an underserved group. It led park officials to pursue the idea of a children’s edutainment facility.

“We want to make sure though that whatever we do it stays in line with our mission,” Basala said.

The park department hired White Hutchinson Leisure and Planning Group, a full-service architectural and site design company based in Missouri, to design the

structure.

“Unfortunately, kids today are over scheduled and have overly structured environments that don’t allow for self-directed play,” White Hutchinson CEO Randy White said. “Children largely don’t have the opportunities today to learn about the world through play.”

Bellaboo’s, however, provides numerous ways for kids to discover things about the outside world while having fun at the same time.

The sprawling facility contains individual rooms built to the children’s scale in which kids move from one area to the next, engaging them in a variety of interactive activities. Everything in Bellaboo’s is meant to be touched, moved, constructed and played with. It includes a block play room, a water room, a pretend kitchen, an art room, a dress-up room, a pretend supermarket, a pretend restaurant, a pretend house, a reading room, a train room and a soft play room (think McDonald’s playground).

When designing other edutainment facilities around the country, White Hutchinson takes into account the mental and behavioral makeup of children.

“An important aspect for children’s

use of the environment is that they are more interested in the process of using the environment than achieving an end result like adults do,” White said. “The ability children possess to interact with, control and transform their environment is very important to them.”

As a means of child protection, a bracelet with the child’s name is given to the child and his or her guardian. Adult guardians aren’t left out of the fun. A 180-seat restaurant area in the center of the facility allows adults to eat while at the same time watch the children play. Additionally, there are five, separate rooms that can be rented for kids’ birthday parties or other occasions.

Construction Detail

Bringing this interactive paradise to life required a considerable amount of planning and detail.

What was built was anything but a normal building. The steel framed building features an exterior that encompasses concrete, metal, stone and EIFS (synthetic stucco).

“We could have built a square box, but if you want to do something unique like

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- Walsh Construction Co. of Illinois
- Worthington Steel Co.

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"Bellaboo"

this with curves, soft finishes and fiber optics, it takes time," Basala said.

While a certain degree of attention had to be given to the building's unusual outside, meticulous detail had to be committed to the inside. That's because the building's primary occupants will not stand taller than 48 inches. Nearly everything inside had to be designed and constructed with a small child in mind.



Water Play Room

"Everything was built according to a child's scale. As a result, you had to think outside the box and you had to pay closer attention to the drawings," said Mike Bailey, whose company,



Pretend Restaurant

Tonn and Blank Construction, was the construction manager on the project.

Since the building's design had to be tailored for small children, it presented some challenges for general contractor R.A. Snemis Construction.

The bathrooms and accompanying fixtures were built to a child's scale. Certain doors and

wall coverings possess curved designs that require more detail than normal designs.

"We've never done anything like this before. It was like building a small house. Everything had to be built with the size of the child in mind. I thought everyone involved did a heck of a job," R.A. Snemis Vice President Ray Snemis said.

In preparation for construction, 10 feet of soil had to be removed and replaced with sand in fall 2006. After this site work was completed in spring 2007, construction began on the facility and was completed in November 2008.

Since that point, interior enhancements and installation have taken place, signage erected and landscaping elements completed. While the project took longer to finish than planned, park officials are pleased with the creation. Design and construction costs totaled \$5 million.

Bellaboo's is something you won't find anywhere else in northern Indiana. Attracting children and their parents for an afternoon or more of fun should be a significant boon to the tourism industry. ♦

For directions to Bellaboo's, go to: buildingindiananews.com



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