

Children & Families: Survey says Geauga lakefront prime for family fun, hiking and retail

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN | Posted: Monday, May 22, 2017 10:45 am

After four months of research and surveys, the Viking Planners Group has completed its report, “Gauga Lake: The Next 100 years.” The long-term vision was released this week about the 650 acres that straddle Bainbridge and the city of Aurora.

The results of the study will be presented to Bainbridge Trustees at their meeting Monday at Bainbridge Town Hall.

The Viking Planners Group is made up of 22 graduate students in the master’s level at Cleveland State University’s Maine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs.

In the vision statement, it is noted that Geauga Lake is a regional and local asset with a unique history and important ecology. The report emphasizes public access to the lake, environment conservation and a mix of land uses that contribute to the environmental and economic health of the region.

It shows that a majority of people surveyed want to see some residential uses and they also want to see green spaces and trails, according to Dr. Wendy Kellogg, a faculty member at the university and a co-instructor of the class with James Kastelic, a research fellow and lecturer.

The report notes that the site was once a “bustling, active vibrant scene where families could treasure memories for lifetimes.

“With this plan, Geauga Lake could return to this model, not as a theme park but as a new place: a place to hike with family, grab coffee with friends, take a relaxing bike ride, or see a show. The difference this time will be a sense of place, a sense of community and a sense of environmental sustainability. This is a place to make memories last for the next 100 years.”

The natural beauty of the lake remains the biggest asset, according to the planning group. The 52-acre lake was formed in the Ice Age, and it was Sullivan Giles who established the picnic grounds in the 1800s that later became the amusement park.

They surveyed residents within 3 miles of the site which is owned by Cedar Fair in Sandusky. The students also interviewed people at the Bainbridge and Aurora libraries and talked to other “stakeholders” including real estate developers, environmental professionals and members of community organizations.

Dr. Kellogg said that the “highest scoring preference was for a center for performances such as concerts.

Responders did not want big-box retail on the site,” she said of those surveyed. There is ample retail within 3 miles of the site, and people said they want specialty shops and restaurants but not more typical retail, Dr. Kellogg said.

There was much response about preserving the green space in the area, she added. As to housing, there is a decrease in the desire for single-family housing and an increase in people looking for apartments, condominiums and town houses, Dr. Kellogg said.

A significant number of the respondents in the survey were 55 and older and there were also younger professionals who might want to buy a place to live, but not so much to maintain, she noted.

With an abundance of general retail already existing in the area, if there is going to be more retail, it should be a destination place where people can enjoy performances, dinner and some shopping in a nice place by the lake, Dr. Kellogg said.

The plan includes recommendations for a site linked by roads. a trail system and boardwalks by the lake.

One area on the western side was seen for mixed use with retail uses, town houses and restaurants. Housing could include cluster and single-family homes along with institutional uses and a performance, recreation and wellness centers.

Those surveyed or interviewed were quite concerned because the area includes the headwaters of Tinker's Creek and the Chagrin River, Dr. Kellogg said. Setbacks from those areas are considered a priority.

She noted there are some challenges on the site, including concrete pavement that will have to be removed and some pollution on the property. The students toured the site with Cedar Fair representatives.

If Cedar Fair and the community think the report and plan have merit, "We would be thrilled if it is adopted and implemented," she said.

They have developed a "robust array of information that should be considered, and the hope is that it will be used as a guide," Dr. Kellogg said.

Mr. Kastelic said based on what the group found out in the surveys and interviews, 50 percent said the site should include a network of trails because of the area involving the lake, wetlands and being at the headwaters of two rivers.

"They found out from a variety of sources that the area is over saturated with retail," he said. There is not a need for more retail with the Marketplace Shopping Center on the other side of Aurora Road (Route 43) and the shopping center with the Target and Home Depot stores.

The plan is for the next 100 years and much retail development is short lived, Mr. Kastelic said. The students put a lot of work into the study and it is based on their expertise and the information gleaned from the surveys, she said.

According to the plan, the goal is to stimulate the economy of the site. Those surveyed and interviewed supported mixed uses and cottage homes, institutional and performing arts, smaller dining areas and public green space.

The top five entertainment or recreation activities desired were concerts, performing arts, biking, hiking and a movie theater. Many favored an amusement park, high-end shopping and restaurants.

"Fifty-nine percent of the total respondents strongly opposed retail shopping and housing, respectively," the study stated, while 85 percent strongly favored parks, trails and green space. "Sixty-seven percent supported retail and restaurants

“Fifty percent of respondents support a center for work, live, shop and play development, despite being heavily opposed to retail shopping and housing,” the study stated.

“These results coupled with the results from the previous questionnaire imply that residents may not want another retail strip center or a large subdivision of housing but would support a mixed-use development with high-end shopping, offices and new restaurants,” according to the report.