

# Bainbridge: Future uncertain for former Geauga Lake land

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN | Posted: Wednesday, December 13, 2017 11:45 pm

After the towering Thunder Rapids slide at the former Wild Water Kingdom was dismantled by a wrecking machine last month, many wondered what was happening with the former Geauga Lake Park property. Cedar Fair of Sandusky owns 651 acres along Aurora Road (Route 43) that spans Bainbridge and the city of Aurora.

The former amusement park and most of the water park were in Bainbridge. Currently, there is some development on the Aurora side with construction underway for the Liberty Ford car dealership at the corner of Aurora (Route 43) and Squires roads expected to be completed by this spring.

Most of the Cedar Fair acreage has been vacant since 2007 when Geauga Lake Park was closed down. Wildwater Kingdom, which opened in 2005 on the east side of the lake, was closed in 2016.

“We’re going to have a conversation with our legal counsel,” Bainbridge Trustee Jeff Markley said. “In order to move things forward, we have to understand what we want to do, from a legal and planning perspective.”

Trustee Kristina O’Brien said that Sean Wall and Tony Visconsi of Hanna Commercial Real Estate have suggested a meeting between Cedar Fair and township representatives on development opportunities.

On Monday, Mrs. O’Brien told trustees that a representative from Hanna Commercial asked in an email if the township would be willing to waive a joint economic development district, known as a JEDD, in order to get the Meijer store development going.

She said that Cedar Fair’s attorney previously had stated that the township was obligated to form a JEDD with Aurora. She noted, however, that a resolution from April of 2015 states that Meijer has to agree to participate in a JEDD with Bainbridge under reasonable terms. “We can get a JEDD with other municipalities,” Mrs. O’Brien said.

She clarified to the real estate firm that she would not support waiving a JEDD for the Meijer property. Trustees plan to discuss the matter in detail at an upcoming meeting.

At this point there is no progress on the JEDD between the city of Aurora and Bainbridge Township regarding the proposed Meijer store that would be located on 41 acres stretching along Aurora Road. With a JEDD, the city would collect income taxes from those working at the businesses and share it with the township. Townships are not permitted by law to collect income taxes and must join with a municipality to do so.

“Everyone wants something done, including elected officials and residents,” Mr. Markley said of the property. “People want to know what is happening. Everyone is trying to figure out where to go from here.” At this time, there is no word of any buyers interested in the property, he noted.

Earlier in the year, trees were logged on 44 acres of Cedar Fair property despite a legal agreement that the land would remain untouched as a buffer between houses in the River's Edge subdivision in Bainbridge and the Cedar Fair property. "Cedar Fair has made it clear that they are not going to do anything about it," Mr. Markley said of restoring the property.

There is also the issue of the city of Aurora providing water and sewer services to the area. Aurora officials are unconvinced that the city is obligated to provide the utilities to land in Bainbridge, he said.

"They want to do something with the JEDD, but they want what they want," Mr. Markley said. "The positions of Aurora and Cedar Fair have been clear, and we are evaluating our potential position.

"The township wants a logical master development plan for the area," Mr. Markley said. A master plan has been developed that included the Aurora parcel, and it reflected a shared vision for the district, he said.

"Now, I don't know if the plan is as useful as we thought it was going to be when it was developed."

The Bainbridge master plan involves mixed-use zoning for the Cedar Fair property was based on working together with Aurora, he noted, for consistent development.

"We want the history accentuated," he said of preserving some of the Geauga Lake Park's past by way of displaying memorabilia as the area is developed.

Bainbridge Zoning Inspector Karen Endres said the Meijer superstore project proposed for the former Geauga Lake Park parking lot on Route 43 is in limbo partly because of the uncertainty of finding a provider for sewer and water service.

She has approved the lot split, which would set 41 acres apart from the Cedar Fair property for the superstore. Cedar Fair now needs to create the Meijer lot, she said.

Trustee Lorrie Benza said Bainbridge Township Trustees have not heard anything about the property from Cedar Fair representatives. The Meijers store has not submitted an application to the Geauga County Building Department, she added.

Mrs. O'Brien said the city of Aurora should provide the utilities for the Meijer site based on the original agreement worked out several years ago. Geauga Lake had sewers and water, she added.

The JEDD is a separate matter, she said, and adding that the superstore development should not hinge on that agreement. "We could start negotiating a JEDD with another community," she said pointing out that it doesn't have to be the city of Aurora.

Keeping the area active and attractive is important, Mrs. O'Brien said. "It is so discouraging when you see a vibrant property fall into disrepair." The utilities are there, she added, so "why not provide them?"

In regards to the JEDD with Aurora, Mrs. O'Brien said, "my perception is we had some terms everybody was comfortable with and then the tree cutting occurred and the conversation stopped."

Mrs. Benza said trustees would willingly meet with Cedar Fair representatives in a public meeting, but not an executive session. She questioned what could be new. "We haven't heard anything except they asked to meet."

Mr. Markley agreed that going over the same issues would be pointless. “We would like to meet with Cedar Fair and Hanna Realtors if there is something different to discuss.”