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## Pulte proposing houses, offices, stores on former Sea World site

by JOAN DEMIRJIAN 15 hrs ago

A development of 321 houses, commercial space and offices is being proposed for the former Sea World of Ohio parking lot in the city of Aurora.

Pulte Homes is proposing the plan on the land owned by Cedar Fair which also owns the adjoining former Geauga Lake and Wild Water Kingdom parks in Bainbridge. The proposed plan would border the River's Edge development in Bainbridge located on the north side of an unused railroad track.

Aurora City Planning Commission met this past Wednesday and was scheduled to formally accept the application so that a study could begin. Initial information showed 321 homes to be built on 111 acres. Commercial and office space would be built on about 20 acres, and an additional 112 acres would be donated to the city for public parks.

The land in Aurora is part of the total 650 acres owned by Cedar Fair in the city and in Bainbridge Township.

Aurora Mayor Ann Womer Benjamin said Monday that Pulte filed an application with town homes and houses, commercial and office spaces and the parkland. "I think it's a positive proposal from a single developer, with a vision for 245 acres," she said.

It has been the preferred type of development to have one developer rather than a piece meal type of development, Mayor Womer Benjamin said. "Pulte's plan seems to match our mixed-use zoning adopted in 2014."

Aurora's conceptual plan included residences in the general area.

The land for which Pulte Homes has a purchase agreement from Cedar Fair includes a former quarry area off Treat Road and would include development on the northern and eastern sides of the street as well as some park areas.

Mayor Womer Benjamin noted that some people have been both inquiring about the plan as well as complaining about there being no development on the Geauga Lake land. "This has potential although some are voicing concerns about more houses in the city," she said.

"I think it has been a long road over the last 5 ½ years to get to the point where someone has come forward with a vision and is proposing a cohesive plan for 240 acres," Mayor Womer Benjamin said.

Aurora Councilman Jim Vaca said the development with its mixed use of offices, commercial buildings and houses would be similar to Crocker Park in Westlake. Most of it would be in the old Sea World parking area.

"I have no objections," he said Monday. "I think it's going to be a good thing." He noted that the parking lot is filled with asphalt which can be ground up. It's good re-usable material, such as for trails and driveways, he said.

In Bainbridge, there are approximately 270 acres of Cedar Fair owned land, and like the Aurora land, it is zoned for mixed use, according to township Zoning Inspector Karen Endres. There are about 61 acres on the north side of the former railroad line that are under the township's residential 5-acre zoning, she said. It was intended to be a buffer between the amusement parks and homes in Bainbridge.

So far, there are no proposals for the Cedar Fair land in Bainbridge, she said. While some people have suggested that the township establish another amusement park, she said, Bainbridge doesn't own the land and the property is not zoned for amusement parks.

Meijer grocery store had obtained approval from Bainbridge for a lot split that involved 41.39 acres of Cedar Fair land fronting on Aurora Road (Route 43). Though that land was zoned for mixed use, the township granted a variance that would have cleared the way for the big-box store.

"We never heard from Meijer and it never went forward," Mrs. Endres said of the application she signed off on in 2016. "I never heard back from them."

One unsolved issue was water and sewer services for Meijer that would have had to have been provided by the city of Aurora.

Bainbridge residents Allen and Bev Knox have lived on Rivers Edge Drive since 1978. Mrs. Knox said they prefer the homes proposed in the Pulte plan rather than the possibilities of a big factory with noises. "It will add to the beauty of the area," she said. "Good for Aurora. We're happy Aurora is moving forward. I wish Bainbridge would as well."

Right now, the Cedar Fair property is an "eyesore," she said of what was left behind, including rundown buildings, other structures and the parking lots throughout the area.

Geauga Lake Amusement Park closed in 2007, Sea World in 2001 and Wildwater Kingdom in 2016.

"We would like to see the Sea World and Geauga Lake land cleared up and become a benefit to everyone," Mrs. Knox said of the Bainbridge side. Something has to get started because it could take a couple of years, she added.

Speaking of the area around Geauga Lake itself, mostly in Bainbridge, she noted there could be beaches with condos and homes and some small commercial buildings. "It could be a place you could go over to and walk in and there could be a nice restaurant."

Bainbridge resident Scott Henry said he would also like to see something done on the Bainbridge side. While Bainbridge residents don't have much say about the Aurora development, he would like to see developers put up a lot of lights.

Tom Noble, of Bainbridge and living near the Aurora site, said he likes the idea of a Crocker Park type of development, with a nice mix of homes, retail and parkland. "In my mind, that would be ideal. I think that kind of a concept is attractive and is good for that area."

Bainbridge Trustee Lorrie Benza said the concept proposed for the Cedar Fair property as a result of a study by graduate students at Cleveland State University in May of 2017 would have been ideal for the entire 650 acres.

The Cedar Fair grounds manager, Mayor Womer Benjamin and Bainbridge Trustee Jeff Markley were the contacts during the planning by the students. In gathering plans, they reached out to stakeholders, Mrs. Benza said. The final plan suggested an amphitheater, boutiques, walking trails and incorporating the nostalgic themes from Geauga Lake Park.

It was a comprehensive plan, aptly titled, "Geauga Lake, The Next 100 Years," she said, but apparently was not adopted by Cedar Fair. "I thought it was ideal for the future of that property. It was wonderful and would have served the two communities into the future."

The first major development on the Cedar Fair land in Aurora came in May of 2018 when Liberty Ford opened a dealership that fronts onto Aurora and Squires roads. Liberty Auto Group bought 14 acres of land from Cedar Fair for \$1.43 million. Aurora records have shown that Liberty Ford planned to employ 57 full-time and 10 part-time workers for an annual payroll of about \$3 million. Liberty moved its dealership from Solon after talks with city officials over expansion plans hit a wall.

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