

## Aurora Council to review development plan on Geauga Lake land

Joan Demirjian Aug 15, 2019

Aurora Council next week will examine a proposal by Pulte Homes for home, commercial and office development on the former Sea World of Ohio parking area now that the city Planning Commission members gave their approval.

The commission voted unanimously for the conceptual plan on Aug. 7.

The land is owned by Cedar Fair of Sandusky which also owns the former Geauga Lake Park land in Bainbridge. The former Sea World parking area to be developed with the Pulte homes was more recently used by Cedar Fair's Wild Water Kingdom water park. It is adjacent to the River's Edge subdivision in Bainbridge.

This is the preliminary site plan, Aurora Mayor Ann Womer Benjamin said, adding that it will now go to city council for review. "Six votes out of nine are needed to reject or amend it," she said of city council's actions. The developers have worked with the city and planning commission and have adapted their initial plan to better meet the city's expectations, the mayor said.

The plan is scheduled to go before City Council on Aug. 19. "I expect council will hold three readings on it into September," Mayor Womer Benjamin said.

"We expect landscaping and buffering and some recognition of the Geauga Lake history," the mayor said. "That is in our design standards for the entire property." Liberty Ford at Squires and Aurora (Route 43) roads for example has incorporated Geauga Lake Park photos in its showroom, she said.

"I toured it with Pulte," Mayor Womer Benjamin said of the property. Other city representatives did as well. "I think this is a positive development for the city and we will monitor its progress as plans evolve since this is a preliminary plan," she said. "The quarry makes for pretty vistas for residents." An old quarry and a campground are included in the site plans.

Jim O'Conner, director of planning for Pulte Homes, told members of the Aurora Planning Commission on Aug. 7 that through feedback from the community and a site tour with city representatives including council members, they arrived at the plan that captures the essence of the city zoning code.

The current plan is Pulte's summary and evolved plan and is in response to concerns expressed by the community, Mr. O'Conner said. The density is at 2.5 units per acre.

The former Geauga Lake property and Sea World site owned by Cedar Fair totals 650 acres. Aurora has rezoned 560 acres in the city to mixed use. That includes property beyond the Cedar Fair land. The rezoning of the property on the Aurora side was supported by 82 percent of the voters, according to Mayor Womer Benjamin.

Bainbridge has also rezoned the adjacent former Geauga Lake Park property within its boundaries to mixed use which includes housing, offices and commercial.

Pulte will be developing 245 acres which includes the former camp ground, quarry and the Sea World parking lot as well as parkland on 112 acres. Mr. O'Conner said they listened to people's concerns about avoiding high density.

The plan calls for development of the homes on 111 acres with 20.6 acres to be developed for commercial uses. Some 98 acres will be for parkland.

Pulte came to Aurora, recognizing the development issues, including the parking lot asphalt that needs to be removed, existing ponds and lakes and bedrock on the east side of the rail line that will have to be blasted, according to Mayor Womer Benjamin. It is something no other developer has been willing to tackle, she said.

According to Mr. O'Conner, the plan has undergone seven revisions, in response to city and public concerns.

On the western side of the acreage, which is off Squires Road, there will be town houses and single family homes. The houses will be on lots 60 feet wide and there will be 119 town homes and 64 lots for individual houses. The two-story townhouses will be Western Reserve style.

On the east side, off Treat Road, there will be 125 housing units, with 80-foot wide lots. The plan provides for 40 feet between homes. There will be one entrance to the community off Treat Road.

The commercial development includes offices off Squires Road and retail establishments at Treat and Aurora (Route 43) roads. The development surrounds Liberty Ford.

The plan calls for staggered setbacks and an architectural diversity, Mr. O'Conner said.

Neighborhoods will be walkable in keeping with the city zoning code, Mr. O'Conner said. The stately front entrances will be landscaped with buffers to control the view of the homes, he said. "They will be well landscaped in direct response to the feedback," he added.

"We have been making sure they are consistent with the goals and intent in the city zoning code," Mr. O'Conner said.

They are working on the former railroad right of way that passes through the property.

Planning Commission member and Chairwoman Kathi Grandillo said the mixed-use zoning for the site was created for commercial and different types of housing. She commended Mr. O'Conner for listening to the community.

Some people have said there is too much retail space in the city and some say no more houses. The things they want however, are not going to come without more houses, she said.

She also noted there are parks in other parts of the city, "but not in this part of town." The park area would be fantastic for that area, she said.

Member Peter French said there were concerns about density, and Pulte has reduced the number of houses and "that's great."

There was a concern about homes creating run-off into the proposed park area, the quarry and Geauga Lake. The Chagrin River Watershed Partners has said those areas would not be affected, he said.

Planning commission member Laura Duguay questioned the commercial development and if they would build before there are owners or tenants. Mr. O'Conner said they will have an anchor tenant or owner in place before building starts.

Jack Burge, Aurora's director of economic development, in commenting on the commercial area said homes must come first because businesses won't consider an area unless there are more houses.

"I'm delighted to see the project from the housing standpoint because it's going to spur commercial development," Mr. Burge said. The proposed population is at least 600 people, according to Mr. O'Conner.

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