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## Bainbridge, Aurora closer to Geauga Lake JEDD

Sam Cottrill

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Just as the ceremonial shovel broke ground to kick off the start of a mixed-use development around Geauga Lake in Aurora, officials from the city and Bainbridge Township are starting to take strides toward an agreement for the rest of the former amusement park land.

Bainbridge and Aurora have set the date of Sept. 28 at 7:30 p.m. for a public hearing on a joint economic development district, known as a JEDD, for the property once home to Geauga Lake Amusement Park and SeaWorld Ohio. In the proposed agreement, Aurora would provide sanitary sewer and water services at a premium to the district to help in future economic development of the property.

Bainbridge reopened JEDD discussions in January with Aurora for the approximate 250 acres located in the township. Since then, talks have been held behind closed doors until both communities came forward with the announcement of the public hearing.

“The JEDD has been put together through much back and forth,” Bainbridge Trustee Chairwoman Kristina O’Brien said last week. Trustees approved the setting of the public hearing, and the proposed agreement was posted last week in the township’s fiscal office and made available to residents.

Aurora Mayor Ann Womer Benjamin said the land straddling the two communities has remained open since the amusement parks closed years ago. “So I think it is critical and certainly beneficial to all of Northeast Ohio to develop it in a thoughtful and cohesive manner,” she said in an interview with the Times. “With this JEDD agreement pending with Bainbridge and Aurora, I think we are certainly moving in that direction.”

Earlier this summer, PulteGroup, Inc., an Atlanta, Georgia-based home developer previously known as Pulte Homes, purchased 245 acres of the Geauga Lake property located in Aurora for the development of what will be Renaissance Park. Pulte officials said it plans to build 308

residential units, including 119 townhouses, 64 single-family homes and 125 ranch-style homes. About 20 acres will be designated for commercial use and 97 acres will be maintained as parkland.

Jim O'Connor of PulteGroup explained in the June 3 Aurora Planning Commission meeting that phase one of the construction would include the development of 50 townhouse units, 36 single-family units and the 125 ranch-style homes. The development is anticipated to have its grand opening in March of 2021.

The Geauga Lake property is split between Aurora and Bainbridge, totaling about 550 acres. About 276 acres currently owned by Cedar Fair, L.P., the majority of which is in Bainbridge, are under contract for purchase by Industrial Commercial Properties, LLC, a real estate developer in Solon.

Mayor Womer Benjamin said ICP's interest in developing the property restarted the JEDD discussions between the city and township.

"Bainbridge needed utilities in order for this area to be developed and Aurora can provide those utilities, [but] Aurora won't just gratuitously provide the utilities," she said in an interview with the Times. All along, Aurora was seeking an agreement that would benefit the city for providing utilities, she said.

In late January, the Bainbridge Board of Zoning Appeals unanimously denied four variance requests from ICP needed to develop the property, which is in the township's mixed-use planned unit development, or MUP, district. Preliminary site plans showed uses for retail, residential, commercial, hospitality, entertainment and office, including the development of two big-box stores along Aurora Road (Route 43).

The requested variances were to allow heavy retail, multi-family dwelling apartments with first-floor residential use, lots larger than 50,000 square feet and residential use within 500 feet of the lake. The township's MUP district, however, prohibits just those requests, namely the development of big-box stores.

ICP filed an appeal on the denial to the Geauga County Court of Common Pleas in February with Judge Carolyn J. Paschke assigned to the case. The case is still open, and the township has since been meeting in executive session for negotiations with the developer.

If or when middle ground is found between Bainbridge and ICP, the township will still need sanitary sewer and water services to develop the property. The JEDD agreement with neighboring Aurora plans to do just that.

“[Bainbridge and Aurora] intend to create and operate the district for the purpose of facilitating economic development, creating or preserving jobs and employment opportunities and improving the economic welfare of the people in the state, the city, the township and the district,” the proposed agreement states. “The creation of the district will assure the appropriate development of the property included in the district. The township and the city desire to work together to protect this area which provides economically viable alternatives for the development of the property in the district.”

Under the agreement for the JEDD, both Aurora and Bainbridge will retain all mutual aid for fire protection and EMS services in the district, Bainbridge will continue to provide road construction and maintenance and Aurora will provide sanitary sewer and water services.

The JEDD will establish a board of directors including a representative of Aurora appointed by the city, a representative of Bainbridge appointed by the trustees, a representative of business owners on the property, if any, appointed by the township trustees and a representative of employees of the district appointed by Aurora. The agreement states that the board will select one “neutral” member to serve as chair of the board, who can be removed by mutual agreement between the two municipalities.

Net income tax revenue within the JEDD is to be split between four designations within the neighboring communities and the established board of directors, according to the agreement. Twenty-five percent of the income tax revenue will go to Bainbridge, 25 percent to Aurora, 25 percent to a maintenance and improvement fund through the board of directors and 25 percent to Aurora to be placed in a utility fund.

Revenue placed in the maintenance and improvement fund is to be “utilized for maintenance, replacement, and improvements located or to be located within the [district] as determined by the [board],” the agreement states. Revenue in the utility fund will be for maintenance, replacement and infrastructure improvements to Aurora’s sewer and water systems, in which “such work is directly and proximately necessary in order to properly maintain and provide water and sewer service to the District.” The agreement states that the fund, however, may be subject to “inspection, examination and audit” by Bainbridge and the board of directors.

In July, Trustee Jeff Markley announced that the documents for the JEDD were in “Aurora’s court” for review, and he and Trustee Lorrie Sass Benza hinted at development opportunities for the site, noting this to be an “exciting” opportunity for the property and the township.

Both municipalities agree that the property has become an eyesore since Geauga Lake Amusement Park closed in 2007, preceded in the 2000 closing of SeaWorld and followed by the 2016 closing of Wildwater Kingdom.

“I’ve been mayor for almost seven years.” Mayor Womer Benjamin said, “and from the very beginning of my tenure, we’ve been having discussions with Bainbridge regarding the development of the Geauga Lake area. We had specific discussions with Bainbridge about a JEDD and thought we had reached agreement three years ago,” she said. “Then Bainbridge decided it was not going to pursue it at that point.”

Trustees said that they pulled out of the JEDD discussions in 2017 due to logging in an area intended as a buffer between township residents and the former amusement park.

But now the two communities have a tentative agreement.

“[We are] pleased that Bainbridge and Aurora have finally reached agreement regarding the Bainbridge side and its development, and look forward to working in the future with Bainbridge,” the mayor said.

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Sam Cottrill started reporting for the Times in February 2019 and covers Auburn, Bainbridge, Bentleyville and Chagrin, Kenston, Solon and West Geauga schools. She graduated from Kent State University in 2018 with a bachelor's degree in journalism.