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## Bainbridge and Aurora OK joint Geauga Lake economic district

Sam Cottrill

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It was unanimous as Bainbridge Township and the City of Aurora settled on the Geauga Lake Joint Economic Development District that has been months – or years – in the making, paving the way for potential development of the site.

Both communities met separately Monday night for their respective regular trustees and council meetings where each held a public hearing for the JEDD agreement, followed by votes for its approval. The property in question includes about 250 acres of land in the township once part of the former Geauga Lake amusement park and SeaWorld Ohio.

“On behalf of the board of trustees, it was a long process,” Trustee Jeff Markley said during the meeting. “It’s been a long road, and we have worked very hard, obviously, to get something done.” He added the agreement is a project “worthy of the attention we put into it.”

“I think it’s a very exciting moment for both Aurora and Bainbridge and certainly for Northeast Ohio. This agreement provides a real opportunity for economic development in that Geauga Lake area and raises the foundation for the future,” Aurora Mayor Ann Womer Benjamin said in an interview with the Times on Wednesday. “I think it’s important that the residents of both communities recognize how hard the trustees and the city worked to make this agreement a reality. It was not easy. It took a lot of time. The trustees were, of course, interested in protecting their community and I was very interested in protecting my community. And I think we achieved that in a very balanced agreement.”

Bainbridge reopened JEDD discussions with Aurora at the beginning of the year after having previously pulled out of an agreement with the city in 2017. Trustees said this was due to logging on the property intended to be a buffer between residents and the former amusement park. Since the reopening, discussions have taken place behind closed doors until the announcement of the public hearing last month.

The Geauga Lake property, totaling about 650 acres, is located in both Bainbridge and Aurora with approximately 276 acres between the two communities, most of which is in Bainbridge, currently owned by Geauga Lake, LLC and under contract for purchase by Solon real estate developer Industrial Commercial Properties, LLC.

Attorney Dale Markowitz of Thrasher, Dinsmore and Dolan, announced to the trustees Monday night that Aurora City Council unanimously approved the agreement. Mr. Markowitz represents ICP in their proposed development within the JEDD.

“It’s a monumental evening for Geauga Lake, Bainbridge and Aurora,” Mr. Markowitz said.

Mayor Womer Benjamin said the vote was unanimous among the present council members. She said eight of nine members were present for the Monday night council meeting.

“The job of the communities going forward is to work to implement the provisions of the JEDD agreement,” she added.

Under the terms of the agreement, Aurora will provide the district, made up of 22 parcels between Aurora Road (Route 43) and Depot Road to the township and city limit, with sanitary sewer and water services at a premium.

Both communities will provide mutual aid for fire and EMS services in the district, Bainbridge will provide road construction and maintenance and Aurora will provide the sanitary sewer and water services, according to the agreement. The JEDD also establishes a board of directors including representatives of Aurora, Bainbridge and potential business owners and employees of the district. Income tax revenue within the new district is to be divided into four equal parts between Bainbridge, Aurora, a maintenance and improvement fund and a utility fund.

Trustee Lorrie Sass Benza, along with Mr. Markley, thanked attorneys and township officials involved in pulling the JEDD agreement together with Aurora. “It’s been a long time coming,” she said.

With the agreement, “the potential for an economic impact to Geauga County is huge. It’s so substantial,” she later added.

“We look forward to announcing it,” Mr. Markley chimed in.

“We obviously are all awaiting the actual purchase and plans for development of the property,” Mayor Womer Benjamin said. “That is still to come.”

In January, the Bainbridge Board of Zoning Appeals denied four variance requests ICP needed to develop the property, located in the township’s mixed-use planned unit development, or MUP, district. Preliminary plans included two big-box stores, retail and residential units with space set aside for commercial, hospitality, entertainment and office uses.

ICP filed an appeal to the Geauga County Court of Common Pleas in February. While the case is still open, the township has since met in executive sessions with the developer for negotiations. Judge Carolyn J. Paschke is assigned to the case.

PulteGroup, Inc., formerly Pulte Homes, owns 245 acres of the Geauga Lake property located in Aurora. The home developer broke ground last month for the development of Renaissance Park, which will include residential units such as townhouses, single-family homes and ranch-style homes, 20 acres for commercial use and 97 acres of parkland. The grand opening for this development is slated for March of 2021.

According to the Ohio Revised Code, the JEDD does not go into effect until 31 days after Monday night’s execution of the agreement.

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## Sam Cottrill

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.