

## Keeping the memory of Geauga Lake alive, as property goes from roller coasters to retail, residential

Updated Nov 18, 2020; Posted Nov 17, 2020



An artist's rendering shows how the former Geauga Lake amusement park might be developed.

By [Susan Glaser, cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)

BAINBRIDGE TOWNSHIP, Ohio — It's been 13 years since the last scream on the Big Dipper. And four since the final float down the lazy river.

Coming soon to a shuttered amusement park near you: housing, retail, office space and more. It's the "more" that Bainbridge Township Trustee Jeff Markley has been working hard to influence.

Markley, a trustee since 2006, has devoted himself almost full time in recent months to molding the development of hundreds of acres of land that once housed Geauga Lake amusement park, founded in 1887 on the edge of a small spring-fed lake in Northeast Ohio.

"It's not what so many people would like – their amusement park back," said Markley, a landscape architect. "But it can't just be parking lots and big buildings and residential. It has to be more than that."

Last month, Solon-based [Industrial Commercial Properties](https://www.icp.com) bought the land from Cedar Fair, the Sandusky-based owner of Cedar Point and more than a dozen amusement parks. [ICP plans to convert the Geauga Lake](https://www.cleveland.com) land into a mixed-use development, with shopping, housing, retail and office space.

ICP's purchase includes 377 acres, the majority of which is in Geauga County's Bainbridge Township. The sale comes on the heels of an announcement over the summer that Pulte Homes was putting more than 300 housing units on the Aurora side of the former amusement park property.

"We are pleased the property is being put back to a productive use, beneficial to the community, and happy a well-respected company like Industrial Commercial Properties will be leading the development," said Duffield Milkie, executive vice president and general counsel for Cedar Fair.

The sale marks the end of a long, controversial period for Cedar Fair, which has, over the years, been accused by local residents of buying Cedar Point rival Geauga Lake just to shut it down.

Markley, who worked at Geauga Lake as a teenager and maintains hard feelings toward Cedar Fair, prefers to think of this new chapter not as an ending – but a beginning.

“Would I rather have an amusement park there? Yeah, sure,” he said. “Knowing that that really isn’t very realistic, it’s better to have something after 13 years than nothing. When all is said and done, I think we’ll be happy with what is there.”

Chris Salata, chief operating officer for Industrial Commercial Properties, said the company has every intention of following through on its stated promise to showcase the park’s history and evoke the nostalgia that many still feel about Geauga Lake.

In addition to buying the land, ICP also acquired the rights to the Geauga Lake name and logo. “We intend to incorporate that into everything from land to street to signage to lights,” he said.

The development will be called the Geauga Lake District and feature a new Geauga Lake Boulevard connecting Ohio 43 to Depot Road. An artist’s rendering shows a roller-coaster inspired piece of artwork in the boulevard’s median at the entrance to the development.

“Our entire development team grew up in Northeast Ohio and spent time at Geauga Lake,” Salata said. “We hope it’s a place where people can relive some of those memories.”



A roller coaster-inspired piece of artwork could be included at the entrance to the new Geauga Lake District.



Geauga Lake's iconic Big Dipper, circa 1993. The Plain Dealer



Development of the former Geauga Lake amusement park includes public access to the 50-acre spring-fed lake.

Even so, long-time fans of the park remain disappointed.

“I’ve accepted it as much as I can right now,” said Joe Taylor, who co-wrote “Gauga Lake: Sunrise to Sunset” in 2014 and moderates a [Facebook page](#) devoted to the park’s history. “It’s been an amusement park for a hundred years. Putting these houses in – in a hundred years, they’ll be gone.”

Still, he added, “It’s better than nothing. As long as there’s some public space, that will appease a lot of people. You’re not going to make everyone happy. It’s not going to be an amusement park ever again.”

Taylor is hopeful that the development will include an abundance of public space – the lakefront, possibly a history museum and maybe a bandstand for music and special events.



Renderings released by ICP are concepts only, devised within the framework of the master plan developed for the property. The company is now shopping those ideas to potential developers and tenants.

The only firm commitment thus far is from Menards, the Wisconsin-based home improvement store chain.

Other pieces of the development will be announced as they make commitments. Salata said it could take years before the entire site is developed.

He said much of the land will remain public space, including access to the lake itself. He envisions the possibility of boardwalks in and around the water, with restaurants and retail nearby, in a style similar to Navy Pier in Chicago, though on a smaller scale.

“That eastern side of the lake could really create a cool environment – for lots of potential entertainment types of uses, waterfront dining, a vineyard, a high-end hotel. All of that is a possibility for that area,” he said.

He’s also eager to explore with Markley the possibility of including a Geauga Lake history museum on the site, which could include artifacts and mementoes that fans have collected over the years.

He cited as a possible model the [Silver Beach Center and Carousel](#) in St. Joseph, Michigan, a complex that celebrates the history of the long-shuttered Silver Beach Amusement Park, which operated from 1891 to 1971.

Gauga Lake got its start in 1887 as a lakefront picnic area, with the first amusement ride added in 1889. The first roller coaster, the Big Dipper, was added in 1925. The park became part of the Six Flags chain in 1998 and then was purchased by Cedar Fair in 2004.

Cedar Fair closed the amusement park in 2007, citing declining attendance. The adjacent water park, Wildwater Kingdom – on the grounds of the former SeaWorld – was shuttered in 2016.

Dennis Spiegel, an industry consultant in Cincinnati, said even if Cedar Fair had never bought it, Geauga Lake likely would not have survived.

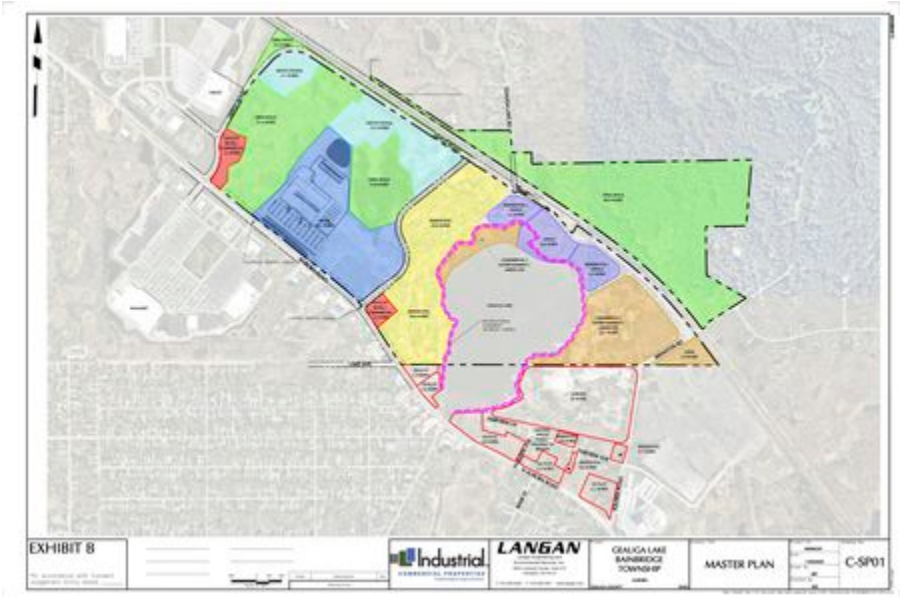
“It would have been put out of business by Cedar Point,” said Spiegel, president of International Theme Park Services. “As the industry began to flourish, bigger parks were invested in. It would have eclipsed what Geauga could have done.”

Richard Munch, a local architect and roller-coaster enthusiast, said he remains disappointed with the entire episode – although he acknowledges that it may have been inevitable.

“Overall, I am admittedly saddened by all of this, as it signals the end to a wonderful time in Northeast Ohio,” said Munch, who co-founded [American Coaster Enthusiasts](#), a nationwide group, in the late 1970s. “Unfortunately, I have also seen this acted out dozens of times in my years of following this industry, as the land has so much value that it can’t continue as a park.”

Markley, too, seems ready to move on after years of talk.

He's looking forward, in particular, to opening up the lakefront area to the public, noting that Geauga Lake started as a picnic area in the late 1800s. "I think we're going to recreate some of that," he said. "We can hearken back to those days."



The master plan for the former Geauga Lake amusement park shows space for commercial, residential and recreational development.