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Partnership commits to developing Geauga Lake

Sam Cottrill
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Preliminary illustrations of ICP's mixed-use development at Geauga Lake showcase the full scope of the project including residential, commercial and entertainment amenities. Potential structures and signage pay homage to the legacy of the former Geauga Lake amusement park and SeaWorld Ohio using rollercoaster tracks and water fountains.

Photo courtesy of Industrial Commercial Properties, LLC

BAINBRIDGE — Residents across Northeast Ohio will once again have long-awaited access to the Geauga Lake property in the township with a partnership with Industrial Commercial Properties. The partnership will kick off the development of the former amusement park site with a Menards supercenter.

In a Sunday press release, Bainbridge announced a public-private partnership with Industrial Commercial Properties, LLC, known as ICP, for a mixed-use development at the 377-acre site within the township once home to the Geauga Lake amusement park and SeaWorld Ohio.

“The use and redevelopment of the former Geauga Lake property has been a frequent and long-standing topic of conversation between residents of Bainbridge Township, Geauga County, and the Township’s Board of Trustees, along with thousands of others all over the country,” the release states.

The amusement park closed in 2007 after the 2000 closing of SeaWorld. Since then, the township and city of Aurora have agreed the property has become an eyesore.

“The fact that there will be development in a mixed-use concept that will allow for public access with something that pays homage to the history and the legacy of the property makes this a great opportunity for Bainbridge and northeastern Ohio,” Trustee Lorrie Sass Benza told the Times on Monday. “From a Geauga Lake standpoint, [the property’s] been vacant for 13 years.

“The opportunity to develop the area in a positive and productive way is absolutely thrilling,” she added. “And then we add into the fact that we have a local company who appreciates the legacy of the property, it just adds to the overall excitement.”

“Following a legal settlement of zoning issues, ICP and its affiliates will acquire the remaining available land currently owned by Cedar Fair, L.P. and create a state-of-the-art mixed-use development including retail, residential and other commercial uses,” the release states.

The first phase of the property’s development, now dubbed the Geauga Lake District, according to ICP’s Sunday press release, will begin with the Menards home improvement superstore on Aurora Road (Route 43).

“The sale for an undisclosed amount on Friday, Oct. 30, to ICP ends the era of Sandusky-based Cedar Fair L.P.’s ownership of the last of the vast site, which includes the former SeaWorld property. It follows Cedar Fair’s sale of another whale of a site carved from the former amusement park in Aurora to PulteGroup of Atlanta,” ICP stated in their release.

The development is the real estate developer’s chance to create a “sense of place,” Chris Salata, chief operating officer of ICP, said in an interview with the Times on Monday.

"[It's] just a fantastic piece of real estate that many of us that grew up in Northeast Ohio have such an emotional connection to given the history here and the former amusement park and SeaWorld," he said. "[It's] going to be a real sense of place – a new place, not the same place it used to be, but a new place [where] I think we'll be able to draw on a lot of those great memories that people have for the site."

He explained the Menards will own 24 acres on the property and is to be a new prototype for the brand. "This is a multimillion dollar investment on their part, but I think it's a great catalyst for the rest of the site."

Without giving specific details just yet, ICP is currently negotiating with a multi-family developer, Mr. Salata said, noting the potential for a high-end apartment project that would sit on the lake.

"This is a prominent multi-family developer in the state of Ohio. And as part of their projects, they like to incorporate a variety of different types of units that would attract everyone from young professionals to empty-nesters," he said. "We're not planning on any single-family homes here. So, this would be [a] product directed at those demographics. And we think that there's a strong demand for that type of product."

Mr. Salata said construction for the Menards is anticipated to begin in the first quarter of 2021 with an early 2022 opening date.

In January, the township Board of Zoning Appeals denied four variance requests for ICP's proposed development, and since February the township and ICP have been in closed-door negotiations with the issue pending before Geauga County Common Pleas Judge Carolyn Paschke. The case is now closed with the new partnership, but negotiations are ongoing for the rest of the development outside court, Mrs. Benza said.

"Relative to everything aside from Menards, the discussions on the particularities are still ongoing," she said of the rest of the property. Setback requirements, height restrictions and stormwater plans are still to be determined. "Countless hours" have gone into this agreement, she added, and countless more will continue.

The property is located in the township's southern mixed-use planned unit development district, or MUP district, bordering Aurora, now part of a Joint Economic Development District, or JEDD, with the city.

The two communities approved the JEDD at the end of September, in which Aurora will provide the site between Aurora and Depot roads with sanitary sewer and water services at a premium in exchange for a portion of the income tax revenue of the district.

The township expects an announcement of future phases “in the near-term,” according to the release, that will incorporate elements of former “Gauga Lake rides, structure, and history” in the design of the development.

Mrs. Benza said the timeframe for more information on the rest of the development could be about 120 days.

Preliminary renderings illustrate residential and commercial developments bordering Geauga Lake with public access to the water via parks, boardwalks and docks, as well as roadside structures and signage that utilize roller coaster rails and fountains.

“Bainbridge is committed to reclaim this discarded property and help to create a tribute to what was once a beloved place for so many,” the release states. “While Geauga Lake, the amusement park, may never reopen, it will not be forgotten as families will once again be welcomed to its grounds as it offers entertainment, recreation, shopping and public access to the property!”

Mr. Salata echoed this sentiment.

“ICP takes this responsibility very seriously. This is an important project for our company. It’s an important project for the region,” he said. “And because most, if not all, of us here at the development firm grew up in Northeast Ohio, we understand the importance of the location and the site, and making sure that the quality of the development that is established here is consistent with the quality of the memories that everybody has of this great location.”

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.