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Vision of Geauga Lake District to honor former park's legacy

Sam Cottrill
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BAINBRIDGE — Due to pending court action, township trustees couldn't share everything in the works thus far between Bainbridge and Industrial Commercial Properties for the Geauga Lake property, but they were able to address residents' concerns and give insight to their vision of what they hope will become a "destination spot" in the community.

One concern Chairman Jeff Markley cleared right away was whether there was unauthorized construction happening at the Geauga Lake property. With lot clearing underway for the Menards Home Improvement store on Aurora Road, the presence of additional vehicles, supplies and equipment near the property has raised concerns within the township that ICP might have initiated more construction within the property than agreed upon.

That is not the case, however, Mr. Markley informed attendees of a hybrid information session Tuesday evening, which was conducted at the Town Hall and via Zoom.

He said FirstEnergy is conducting work on a transmission line running from Twinsburg to Treat Road in the township and had requested permission to park trailers, materials and equipment near the Geauga Lake property. He said this work is likely to continue throughout the year and is entirely unrelated to the development of Geauga Lake.

As for the development, the trustees gave a brief background and walked through the overall vision for the soon-to-be Geauga Lake District, unable to give away any concrete plans just yet with the process under pending court action.

ICP filed an appeal in the Geauga Court of Common Pleas after the Bainbridge Board of Zoning Appeals denied several variance requests for the development last year, putting discussions on the development in full swing. The case is in Judge Carolyn Paschke's court.

"With that pending court action, it limits how much we can discuss publically, which is a concern for us because we want to make sure that we're as transparent as we can be," Mr. Markley said.

Trustees have held work sessions and special meetings in executive sessions with representatives of ICP as they work through the plans for the development. Also included in these discussions are the developer's lawyers from Thrasher, Dinsmore and Dolan, as well as RDL Architects and Behnke and Associates.

Mr. Markley reviewed that the township placed tax increment financing, or a TIF, on the Geauga Lake property in 2018. Of the property tax revenue generated in the new district, 75 percent will support infrastructure improvements for a minimum of 10 years and potentially up to 30 years with the Kenston Local School District's and Auburn Career Center's approval.

At the end of September, he recapped, the township entered into a joint economic development district with the city of Aurora to provide sewer and water to the property. Income tax revenue generated from within the district will be divided into four equal parts between the township, city, a maintenance and improvement fund and a utility fund.

Currently, he said, the township and ICP are working through a consent judgment entry.

"This is an agreement that allows the township and the developer to agree to do whatever," Mr. Markley said. "It actually supersedes the zoning, supersedes county standards, it's an action by the court and it helps to facilitate a development based on the terms of both [parties]."

He said Menards was the "first domino" in this process. In October, the township entered into a public-private partnership with ICP for the development of the new Menards, to be located on Aurora Road, not long after ICP officially purchased the approximately 376 acres in Bainbridge and Aurora around the lake from Cedar Fairs.

"We talked about nostalgia, we talked about public access to the lake, we talked about all these good things," Mr. Markley said. "The only way that happens is if somebody is actually developing the site. Taking what is around you and making it into productive use."

The sale of the property to Menards will do just this, he said. Now the focus is on the remaining approximate 325 acres in the township.

No set plans are in motion yet, but the mixed-use district has potential for multi-dwelling residential units, office buildings, restaurants, shops and parks, along with special attention on public access to the lake and paying proper homage to the former amusement park.

Greg Soltis, senior designer with RDL Architects, presented the architectural vision for the property.

"Our goal here is to create something that is of human scale, that's walkable, and beautiful, and feels like a community," Mr. Soltis said, running through detailed design guidelines in the works for the property. He said this walkable district could be similar to that of Chardon Square and the downtown Chagrin Falls shopping district and will incorporate a street and block grid with primary and secondary streets.

The plans will also identify vistas that "celebrate" into the lake without blocking it, he said, providing beachfront boardwalks with arched structures as examples.

The overall aesthetic of the district, he said, will blend in with Western Reserve architecture, adding that some structures could be contemporary as needed, but "still have high quality materials and still reference traditional forms."

Space is to be designated for recreation or picnicking, he added, reminiscent of pleasure gardens in England, from which the architecture of the amusement park was developed.

Trustee Lorrie Sass Benza commented that after more than 13 years of the land being left vacant, the work put into the property between the township and ICP is "an opportunity to do something that services the community and makes more productive use of land that has just been ignored.

"There's still a lot of detail to be fleshed out," she said, "but there's so much nostalgia, so many memories locked into this property."

"Our expectations are that we're transparent and we're empathetic," Mr. Markley said. "we need to be able to show you as much as we possibly can, recognizing we're still in this legal action."

He said with the township looking to reconstruct their website, he hopes to have an economic development page highlighting the progress and information on the Geauga Lake development.

Mr. Markley added that the township is working with county departments to ensure the safety of residents, and they'll work to address noise concerns as they progress through the planning.

With ICP and the design guidelines, he added that the district will have an extensive vetting process for other potential developers within the property.

Impact on township services, Mr. Markley said, will be supported by revenue from the TIF as well as the JEDD agreement with Aurora. He added that both Aurora and Bainbridge will provide mutual aid to the district, as determined in the JEDD.

"A lot of work has gone into" this project, Trustee Kristina O'Brien said. "A lot of care, concern.

"We want to make Geauga Lake a destination spot," she added. "We want to bring back the history of it."

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.