Construction set to begin in July 2017

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Construction of a central park at the 100-acre Horse Farm on Johnston Street is on track to begin by July 2017, representatives from the nonprofit group overseeing its development told City-Parish Council members on Tuesday.

Lafayette city-parish government purchased the Horse Farm from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette for $5.8 million in 2012 and then leased the property to the nonprofit Lafayette Central Park, which is responsible for building and managing a park there.

The lease is contingent on the group meeting certain deadlines, and the council in January agreed to push back the initial construction start date about two years when it became clear it would not be met.

Lafayette Central Park Chairman Lenny Lemoine told councilmen in a Tuesday update that design work is underway, fundraising is going well and the nonprofit should be able to easily meet the July 2017 deadline to start construction on phase one of the park.

Lemoine also said the nonprofit expects to meet an earlier deadline of January 2017 to secure the minimum of $6.8 million in funding called for under the agreement with city-parish government.

"I can say we are ahead of where we thought we would be," Lemoine said.

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Neither Lemoine nor Lafayette Central Park Director of Administration and Capital Projects Elizabeth “EB” Brooks would comment on how much money has been raised or pledged for the project.

Brooks said the fundraising campaign is still in the “silent” stage, and a public campaign will be launched after a certain level of donations is secured.

“We have internal benchmarks we want to meet,” she said. “Currently, we are focusing on $1 million-plus donors.”

In an effort to boost prospects, the nonprofit hired veteran fundraiser Sheldon Roy earlier this year as director of financial development.

Roy has served as director of major gifts and donor relations for the American Red Cross of Greater Miami and the Keys, and, more recently, as senior vice president of development for the Miami Science Museum.

“That makes a huge difference,” Brooks said of bringing in someone with experience in raising money.

The nonprofit group developed a master plan for the park last year, gathering ideas from a series of community forums. Plans call for lush gardens, walking trails, ponds, pavilions and tree houses. The strategy is to build the park in two or more phases, and the estimate for the first phase hovers around $16 million.

Lafayette Central Park also announced this week that it has moved its offices from the Community Foundation of Acadiana building in River Ranch to space in the Regions Bank building next to the Horse Farm. The bank donated its third floor for use as new offices for the nonprofit.

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