Council approves horse farm plan

Nonprofit now must raise $30 million for construction, maintenance of property

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For nine years, some Lafayette residents fought to preserve 100 acres of undeveloped land on Johnston Street for use as a public park.

Tuesday night, their work paid off. The City-Parish Council approved a master plan to develop the former University of Louisiana at Lafayette horse farm property into a community park.

"I'm elated," said Elizabeth "EB" Brooks, one of those who worked to save the horse farm and who now is director of planning and design for Lafayette Central Park Inc., a nonprofit in charge of developing the park. "It's everything we've worked for for the last nine years."

The move clears the group to begin raising funds to build and operate the park. They need to raise $15 million for construction of phase 1 and $15 million for operations and maintenance.

Lafayette Consolidated Government bought the property from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2012 for $5.8 million and an 8-acre youth and dog park. City-Parish President Joey Durel said at the time that it would take financial donations from the community to build and maintain the park.

Lafayette Central Park Inc. is working with the Community Foundation of Acadiana to solicit donations for phase 1. The attractions to be built in that phase — such as walking trails, ponds and an amphitheater — were determined in part by the community through workshops and online surveys. But some of the decision will depend upon how much money is raised, said David Calhoun, executive director.

"There is a very definite plan to raise money through major donors," he said.

To complete the park will take about $60 million to $75 million, Calhoun said. If the concrete coulee that runs through the park is converted to its natural state, as many residents requested, the cost could be substantially more, he said.

Along with fund raising, Lafayette Central Park Inc. now can move ahead with design and permitting. Groundbreaking is expected to take place in the fall.

Under an act of exchange with UL, the property must be developed into a park within 10 years or see PLAN, Page 6A
ownership of the property reverts to the university. The agreement also prohibits construction of permanent basketball and tennis courts as well as football, soccer, baseball and football fields.

The free park will probably include a few money-making attractions to help with operating and maintaining the facilities. City-Parish President Joey Durel said a nice carousel could be one of those attractions. A mini golf course also has been proposed.

“I think a world-class community deserves a world-class park,” said Alyson Pharr, a Lafayette resident who attended the meeting.

Lafayette is overlooked by some, but the park could open the door so that others can see the beautiful quality of the area, she added.

Catherine Abdalla, who lives next to the park, expressed concern about safety and security because the property is not fenced in. She also asked that it remain open only from dusk until dawn.

Safety was a big concern expressed at community forums, and it is safe to assume the park will not be accessible 24 hours a day, Calhoun said. Decisions like that will be made probably within eight months when the group discusses programming and operations, he said.

Jon “Skip” Palmintier, who grew up next to the park and is co-chairman of the Veterans Action Coalition, asked that a veterans memorial be included in the park. The group may form a foundation to raise money to build a veterans memorial, he said.

Durel praised the council for supporting the purchase when sales tax collections declined this year, he said.

“They could have found an easy way not to do it. I give them credit for that,” Durel said.