
Lake Nasworthy flows with development ideas

Developers share visions for project

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — San Angelo residents were skeptical about having an artificial snow sports turf near Gun Club Hill — so consultants axed the idea.

“Let’s enjoy it in its natural form,” local resident Dionnie Huelsken said. “I want to make sure it stays at the head of what you do, that you preserve.”

Several state and national firms, led by Dallas-based Gateway Planning Group, held two public meetings to present their concepts for the Lake Nasworthy development plan and hear local feedback last week.

As part of the early planning stage of the design and development process, consultants and designers wanted to gather public input and get a sense of what prevailing local interests for the project are, said Scott Polikov, president of Gateway. Having heard from the public, the group will present its final plan proposal to the City Council by the end of the summer.

“People have asked us, ‘Why has the city hired you?’” Polikov said. “We are the integrators. ... We set the stage to break down how certain things might go forward.”

The consulting contract, with a price tag exceeding \$300,000, was narrowly passed by council in mid-September.

Collectively, the groups have résumés boasting projects such as Schlitterbahn water parks and resorts, Austin’s Umlauf Sculpture Garden, the South Padre Island public beach access plan, the Miami Zoo and international projects going as far as Jordan.

“(City employees) don’t have the flexibility,” said AJ Fawver, interim director of planning services, “Staff has to take care of citizens’ requests.”

Hiring third-party consultants with extensive experience in waterfront development design also allows staff to draw from their expertise and tailor it to local interests, Fawver said.

“Lake (Nasworthy) is a series of neighborhoods — it’s a neighborhood lake,” Polikov

said at the second meeting, "If what you see today is not realistic, then we've not done our job."

Between the first and second of the public meetings, the consultants' plans had transformed based on about 50 community interviews and initial feedback from residents.

Some of the more specific concepts proposed at the second meeting included an integrated trail system, a heritage center and a harbor-side village.

"(The lake) has a natural beautiful area with a varied shoreline," said Johanna Arendt, plans manager for the Rivers Studio, one of the contributing firms.

Through stormwater capture and other processes, an old fish hatchery that is no longer in use could be turned into a series of wetlands.

"The ecology would be a draw for native birds and birders," she said. This concept would preserve and use existing assets of the lake and still act as a pull for visitors.

Another concept that would have low environmental and neighborhood impact is an integrated trail system through area parks such as Mary E. Lee Park, Horseshoe Park, areas across Mathis Field Airport and around the lake where it runs into Knickerbocker Road.

With walking as the country's No. 1 recreational activity, according to a national study, San Angelo is no different as evident by the number of people who walk along the trail on Gun Club Road, said Dan Martin, managing principal of Market and Feasibility Advisors.

"There's an importance of the separation between people on bikes and people on foot," he said.

Yet an obvious challenge the groups will bear in mind during the process is the neighborhood interests.

"There's a lot of concern with private property interests, access and easements," Polikov said. "We don't want to suggest any kind of imposition on property rights."

The same applies to the proposed heritage center, which the groups have proposed at the old power plant site, which is one of the plan's only proposed sites occupied by a private owner.

"We're not trying to tell the owner to turn this into a heritage center," Polikov said, but he also did not think the city was in a position to additionally burden taxpayers with purely funding the center.

Through past experiences, the consultants said they normally saw a good response from private or nonprofit sectors in supporting cultural projects such as this.

Other concepts presented included a harbor-side village with a hotel or resort area with direct access to the beach as well as new water sports and recreational developments that could be a draw for national leagues and competitions.

“But I get the sense that, ‘Boy, this is all wonderful stuff, but if the lake is not at a level that functions, it makes no sense to talk about all this,’” said Peter Ravella, principal at Peter A. Ravella Consulting, “I disagree with that notion.”

Now would be the time for the city to start planning, he said. Like the developments around the Austin town lake, which also involved a trail system 25 years in the making, these long-term projects will not happen overnight.

So many developments are already happening around Lake Nasworthy, Ravella said, that it would be better for the city to harness that now so it is not excluded by the private sector.

“There’s no question about the intensity of activity around the lake,” he said. “This lake is going to be used; the private sector is going to continue to invest.”

Not to be ignored is the expected influx of oil field-related activity.

Ravella assured residents that as the firms mapped out the plan, they were keeping the potential transient population, and eventual bust, in mind.

In response to the contrasting interests, Polikov said the consultants’ job is to find the “consent opportunity” rather than consensus.

“You’re never going to have consensus — it’s not possible,” he said.

By hearing from the public and looking at the prevailing opinion and finding what is in the best interest of the city, the consultants can provide an opportunity for informed consent, Polikov said.

With a clearer picture of San Angelo’s concerns and interests, Polikov and his group will move forward aggressively with new knowledge and return with final concepts later this summer.

Once the plan moves out of its drawing board stages, council and staff will be able to flesh out the technical and financial details later this year.

“We’ll make sure we capture, document and frame the issues. It will go in our report and be dealt with for long-term success,” he said. “If you wait for consensus, you’ll never do anything.”

A video recording of both meetings is available at costatx.us.





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