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Fairfield, county officials look to tap into Marsh Park's potential

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FAIRFIELD — A recently signed memorandum of understanding between Fairfield and MetroParks of Butler County will elevate the potential of the city's parks system, including a major project at Marsh Park, officials said.

The city and MetroParks formally entered an agreement last week that forged a partnership where both entities can leverage resources for grant funding, property acquisition, staffing and funding.

Marsh Park is likely the first project the two organizations will collaborate on, said Fairfield City Manager Mark Wendling.

"There's just so many options for this property," he said. "It's kind of unique. There's nothing like it."

Marsh Park, which currently is 30 acres, will eventually be 170-acre site along River Road on the city's west side. Sixty acres of the property will be water in the form of two large lakes.

As it sits now, Marsh Park is a pay fishing lake and half-mile walking path. When the project is completed, the park will be expanded into the adjacent Martin Marietta gravel and sand quarry to create an L-shaped park with two large lakes and a 3.1-mile walking path.

The plan also calls for a connection to the area commonly referenced as Black Bottom, a 30-acre undeveloped park that sits across River Road along the Great Miami River.

New offerings at the park are likely to include open swims in the spring-fed lake and non-motorized boating, as well as many recreation events like triathlon, SCUBA or swimming competitions, Wendling said. And Black Bottom could have a livery for boating on the Great Miami River and a campground.

The current lake, at its deepest points, is about 80 feet deep, and the lake in the undeveloped area is about 30 feet at its deepest point. And the current lake's size — roughly 2,000 meters long — would "dwarf" Butler County's more well-known lake at VOA MetroPark in West Chester Twp., said Mark Hecquet, executive director of the Butler County Visitor's Bureau.

"We don't have anything like that in our area," he said. "It's bigger, which just expands the possibilities."

Though the park is surrounded by neighborhoods off River Road, "there's a really strong buffer," Wendling said. The park "will be centered around the passive nature of the lake," he said, meaning it won't have amenities like soccer fields.

VIEW: See the Marsh Park programming plan

Bringing MetroParks as well as the Visitor's Bureau into the fold will allow for more ideas to create the city's long-term plan for the park.

"The city is bringing all the right players to the table so the park can truly be maximized," Hecquet said.

The city is also requesting public input for the park's master plan.

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MetroParks of Butler County sees this development as a "rare" opportunity to expand a significant amount of green space in a developed city, said Kelly Barkley, the park district's spokeswoman.

"With Butler County developing at its current rate, the opportunity to have 170 acres of green space in a densely populated area that is very accessible and has so many features makes the area truly special," she said. "One of the most unique things about this property is that city of Fairfield leaders recognized early on the potential that the property held and the role it could play as a treasured resource for local city and other area residents."

Before any of the potential can be realized, Martin Marietta, a gravel-mining company, needs to vacate the undeveloped portion to the north of the current park. Martin Marietta has mined the property for more than a half-century, and was set to sign over deed to the entire property to the city this summer. However, that will be delayed for at least two, and maybe upwards of five, years, Wendling said.

"But there's a lot of restoration that needs to take place," he said.

All of the top soil that was removed to get to the sand and gravel needs to be replaced and allowed to settle in order for vegetation to regrow.

But by the time Fairfield gains control of the entire property, some improvements should be completed, such as an extension of the Great Miami bike trail on the eastern side of the park, officials said.

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