

Barrier-free park getting closer to reality in Boynton Beach

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BOYNTON BEACH — Last summer, a long-anticipated \$2.3 million barrier-free city park got the ax during city budget cuts. It was a blow to organizers planning the park since 2003.

But this summer, a group representing the city, western suburbs and local businesses has formed a non-profit foundation whose first project will be to raise the last \$500,000 needed to begin building the park, possibly by early 2011.

The new Greater Boynton Beach Foundation includes representatives of the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Associations, which represents 92 suburban communities, and the Greater Boynton Beach Chamber of Commerce. Organizers plan to file for non-profit status this week. Its goals for the city and western suburbs will be to advance recreation, education and culture.

"The barrier-free park is a perfect example of all three of those coming together," said Mike Penn, the Greater Boynton Beach Chamber of Commerce member of the foundation group. Penn and other members of the foundation committee will present their plans to the city commission at its Tuesday meeting, seeking a one-year \$55,500 contract to retain foundation consultant Charlotte Pelton.

The park will be on Congress Avenue on 13.5 acres of city-owned land next to city tennis courts, south of Woolbright Road. A second phase that would include a 5,000-square-foot building to be used for therapeutic recreation. The playground could be used by children and adults with special needs. The idea for the park was first floated in 2003, then gained momentum with former Gov. Jeb Bush's Florida Boundless Playgrounds Initiative.

The total for the park and the therapeutic recreation building could be \$9 million. The foundation has not yet committed to raising money for the second phase, but is not ruling it out.

The impetus for the foundation began in 2006, when the late assistant city manager Wilfred Hawkins assembled a group to put it together.

"The future of the city and the western area are linked together forever," said COBWRA President Ken Lassiter.

Lassiter's group is sometimes pigeonholed as dominated by retired people, but he points out that 43 of the 92 COBWRA communities are for younger families.

Assistant city manager Lori LaVerriere has been cobbling together the \$2.3 million cost of the first phase from grants, impact funds and money earmarked for recreation.

Raising \$500,000 in a shaky economy is a tricky proposition but Pelton is upbeat.

"When we go to donors, we can say the funding is three-quarters of the way there, just help us finish," Pelton said.

As far back as 2003, Boynton Beach director of recreation and parks Wally Majors was scouting locations for a barrier-free park.

"I've been working in Boynton Beach for 25 years and I take a lot of pride in this city," said Wally Majors. "This is something that will set us apart."

'Boundless' park

Florida has at least seven boundary-free parks, three of which are in Palm Beach County. A barrier-free park is set up so that people with any level of disability can get to and use certain features.

- The park is planned with a swamp theme, since the area of Congress Avenue was once a wetland.
- Sensory play areas will include a music garden, sand area and possibly a dig area.
- Vegetation will include live oaks, sabal palms, bald cypress, red maples, sweet bay and loblolly bay.
- Different plant materials will appeal to the senses of smell, hearing, sight and feel. This will include a bamboo grove, which provides a distinctive rattle when moved by breezes, and flowers with different aromas.
- Art will be built into the walls and paths.
- Play areas will include a settlement area, where play equipment will have a number of different levels and surfaces; a fish camp area with a rustic cabin feel to it; a spider web area that will have concrete animals on which to play.
- A stream bed will run through the areas, connecting two ponds.

'The Swamp' Wetlands run through proposed park



Source: Boynton Beach Recreation and Parks Department

Designed to be boundary-free — so disabled people can enjoy it

What's special about this park?

- Sensory play areas* could be enjoyed by people who don't hear or see well.
- They would feature a music garden with plants that make sounds and have strong scents.
- Sand areas for digging.
- Play equipment with different surfaces.

Why a 'swamp' theme?

This area of Congress Avenue was once a wetland. The 'palm hammock' on the map would be a stream bed linking two ponds.

What's next?

A foundation is trying to raise money to start construction. The Boynton Beach City Commission will discuss the park tonight.



BRENNAN HENL/Staff Artist