

EarthQuest planners' dream dwarfs AstroWorld

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WHAT'S ON DRAWING BOARD SO FAR

A theme park with 50 attractions that can take visitors on rides through a fiery volcano or let them encounter life-sized dinosaurs.

A 12-acre water park made from a retreating glacier.

An animal park featuring creatures from Africa, South America and Texas, along with a breeding center for threatened species.

A "green gadget garage" which retools trash into go-carts, playgrounds, miniature golf courses, Ferris wheels and arcade games.

A hotel and conference center that includes forest cabins and suites built as treehouses.

When AstroWorld was dismantled five years ago, many residents shed tears at losing the longtime Houston icon.

A small group has since been studying and drawing plans for an upscale Disney-styled entertainment complex that would be seven times larger than Houston's original park.

They want to build it on 500 wooded acres — which they own — adjacent to U.S. 59 in Montgomery County, just a short drive from the airport and downtown Houston.

But the plan is now two years behind schedule. Organizers say this is because their vision has slowly evolved from a 50-acre dinosaur park to EarthQuest — an elaborate ecofriendly entertainment zone that teaches environmental stewardship.

The \$500 million project was also stalled by the sluggish economy, but now organizers are hoping to have financing by year's end and construction completed by 2013.

"In the last 60 days, things have loosened up. We're looking at five investor groups to see who's a fit," said John Marlin, a Dallas real estate investor who owns the site. "I feel the wind is at our backs."

The organizers will not disclose those investors' identities, except to say some are domestic and others are international, with some not requiring any debt service.

The project's original creator and limited partner, Don Lessem, a paleontologist who was scientific adviser for the film *Jurassic Park*, agreed: "I'm confident, but I'll be on pins and needles until we have a signed contract."

Chris Brown, an ex-Disney veteran with Contour Entertainment which is doing the design, cites three economic studies that found the entertainment complex would be viable.

The studies noted: Houston is the fourth largest metropolitan area but the only one in the top 11 that doesn't have a theme park; major entertainment centers are situated on either coast but not in the country's central corridor; 18 million people live within a four-hour drive of the proposed site; and the Houston area has a relatively strong economy with a young population.

'Global destination'

Jim Gaines, a Texas A&M real estate expert, said such an investment can be a gamble but also bring a good return.

In the current economic climate, he added, an entertainment investment can look more appealing when compared to stocks and bonds.

The project's organizers have already invested \$30 million in the land and schematic drawings. This includes \$7.5 million in bond money obtained through the East Montgomery County Improvement District. The district, funded by a 1.5 cent sales tax, was created in 1994 to improve the area's quality of life and create jobs, with 1,200 expected to be employed at this park.

"Based on letters of interest for commitment on different financing, we are very optimistic," said Frank McCrady, the district's CEO. "People who fund a project like this are not looking at the economy now, but at a 20-year return."

The entertainment center is being designed as "global destination" and not just a compilation of roller coasters and spin rides, organizers stressed.

"Like Disney, the unique underpinning will be the story that we're telling — the whole issue of how to sustain our planet," said Brown. "We've made no mistake in doing this in Houston, the energy capital where companies are researching alternative energy sources."

Plans call for:

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A "green gadget garage" which retools trash into go-carts, playgrounds, miniature golf courses, Ferris wheels and arcade games.

A hotel and conference center that includes forest cabins and suites built as treehouses.

The centerpiece would be a \$100 million, nonprofit center where scientists conduct research and visitors would enjoy theaters incorporating smell, touch and 3-D glasses and interactive games on preserving the planet.

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