

Dinosaur Park – Earth Quest Adventure



Plan for dino park project grows

By ROYCELYN BASTIAN May 2, 2008

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Outlet malls, hotels and housing have been added to the EarthQuest Adventures Dinosaur Park project, according to the East Montgomery County Improvement District.

Initially, the project was proposed to just be a museum and theme park with a net ad valorem base of \$700 million. After further discussion and additional planning, more activities have been added to the scope of the project.

“Since that time, we further discussed other components that will be contained in the development. Particularly a hotel site as well as other retail opportunities,” said Frank McCrady, president of EMCID. “With the investment group and developers that are looking at the project, they have gone far and above the initial concept of just a theme park.”

Along with the theme park and museum, developers are now looking into putting an eco-hotel component in the project that will offer treetop lodging. On the west side of the area will be the tourism attraction where there is room for four hotels in the development.

One of the biggest significant changes of the project is the ad valorem base of \$700 million has increased to \$1.5 billion, which includes hotel sites, outlet malls, outlet retail as well as low-, mid- and high-density housing.

“If you break apart the project, the majority of the housing development is contained for the Roman Forest community and the retail and outlet side is contained in the transportation corridor of U.S. Highway 59 on both sides,” McCrady said.

The theme park and museum will be on the further west part of the development. The project also includes space for future retail expansion and office space.

With changes to the dinosaur park, EMCID feels it has increased the investment in the community and diversified the base of the project instead of a single-purpose development.

The EMCID board of directors approved a memorandum of understanding on EarthQuest Adventures. This document outlines reimbursement procedures regarding the developer to reimburse EMCID for the amount of expenses that has been incurred on the front end of the project.

"Initially, we (EMCID) funded money in the beginning towards the project in the amount of \$650,000 and our developer has agreed to reimburse us," McCrady.

Beyond the \$650,000 that the improvement district put in, it also committed to put in \$4.5 million and is receiving consideration in the re-investment in the project.

"By the time we get to November, we are looking at doing a bond issue just to fund the developer \$4,150,000," he said.

The memorandum of understanding also covers the repayment by the for-profit once it receives its construction funding in 2009 and breaks ground. A portion of the construction fund will go back to EMCID.

If the project does not move forward, the agreement will allow EMCID to purchase certain tracts of land. The district started the project by committing to the museum, a 50-acre site.

"This is a binding document. Once we get to November, regardless of the economy, it puts the burden on EMCID to allocate the funding toward the developer for the reimbursement of their expenses," McCrady said. "With economic development projects, there are inherent risks. A risk of \$4 million in relation to a \$1.5 billion investment in our community is a good return on your investment."

For more information on EarthQuest Adventures, call the East Montgomery County Improvement District at 281-654-4419.

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Dinosaur park gets green light

By ROYCELYN BASTIAN – March 4, 2008
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A memorandum of understanding regarding the future development of the dinosaur park and museum, also known as Earth Quest Adventures, should put the negative rumors flying around East Montgomery County to bed.

The East Montgomery County Improvement District along with the developers Marlin Atlantis and Don Lessum have ironed out the details regarding the 150-acre dinosaur park and 50-acre museum that is scheduled to be completed by 2012.

"The memorandum of understanding outlines the details of how the revenue for the dinosaur park is going to be utilized toward the development. We know the project investment is approaching close to \$700 million and with that, we know that's going to continue to grow," said Frank McCrady, president of the East Montgomery County Improvement District.

Projections call for 2.5 million people to visit the dinosaur park in the first year, which will bring in a projected \$175 million. Based on those numbers, EMCID is expected to catch a \$1.75 million windfall from the amusement park project based on its 1 percent sales tax.

The agreement also finalized a zone sales tax, which will include an additional half-percent sales tax within the zone.

"From the zone, we anticipate that we should receive about \$87,500 in revenue," McCrady said. "There is also a proposed parking tax for cars, which are parked in the zone attending the venue and we are expecting 600,000 cars annually."

With that, developers have pledged to contribute approximately \$400,000 a year into the district's scholarship endowment fund.

A hotel tax in the dinosaur park is another anticipated revenue stream for the area. Right now, there are 15 hotels that are scheduled to be built around the park, which will generate \$1.8 million annually. The proposal also includes a 300-room hotel that will be constructed inside the park that is expected to generate \$1.4 million in hotel tax annually.

"Another feature that we looked at is with travel and tourism projects coming to an under-served community. We think that our existing vendors should see a 14 percent increase in revenue and that will generate another \$420,000 in annual sales tax," McCrady said.

If things go according to plan, it is projected that approximately \$6 million to \$6.5 million will be utilized towards park improvements and other projects such as expansion in the water and theme park.

"Time wise, we should see them break ground in nine to 12 months on both the dinosaur park and museum," McCrady said. "What you will see in the meantime is there will be a lot of engineering and environmental studies and testing done at the site."

East Montgomery County was chosen as the site for Earth Quest Adventures out of approximately 64 communities around the country.

The improvement district as well as other members of the community worked closely with state representatives and senators to get a bill passed in the recent state Legislature. That effort was successful and the bill, HB 4015, is currently on the governor's desk waiting to be signed.

It is projected that this 150-acre site will attract more than two and a half million people and will create 2,700 jobs in the area, with 30,000 jobs just for the construction phase. The economic revenue from this project will not only benefit EMC, it will also impact the another surrounding communities.

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Dinosaur park promises mega fun

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PATSY OLIVER

The expansive 150-acre dinosaur park, set to come to New Caney in mid-2010 if all goes as planned, promises to deliver fun for the entire family.

Since the demise of Astroworld has left some in the area hungry for a theme park, this new venture cannot come a moment too soon.

Andy Dill, president of the Community Chamber of Commerce of East Montgomery County, spoke to the Kingwood Realtor Advisory Board Feb. 14 about growth in East Montgomery County.

Dill said that although his portion of the county is often forgotten as part of Montgomery County as a whole, growth there is tremendous, and getting the dinosaur park is remarkable.

Dill explained that 68 cities and 29 states submitted proposals for the park, and New Caney was the developer's top pick. Dill explained that the man behind the park, Don Lessem, said that the East Montgomery County Improvement District's commitment to education was a deciding factor. Each year, EMCID awards \$1,000 scholarships to all district residents who graduate from high school or earn GEDs, regardless of their age.

Lessem is a renowned paleontologist and consultant for the movie "Jurassic Park." Dill said that education is of the utmost importance to Lessem, and that the new theme park will provide many opportunities for visitors, especially children, to interact and learn.

The destination has been named Earth Quest Adventures, leaving the concept open to many avenues for 'edutainment.' Dill said that visitors can expect a 4-D theater. He explained that "4-D is when everything around you is part of the deal. If a dinosaur sneezes, you're gonna get wet."

He said that there will be a very chilly Arctic room, dinosaurs on display, and an observation station where visitors can interact with real paleontologists.

"The concept is that they would be talking live to paleontologists somewhere around the world on location at a dig site," said Dill.

Earth Quest Adventures will be located off U.S. Highway 59 North, near FM 1485 and along Caney Creek. The first phase of the project, the \$50-million museum, is set to break ground this year. An entirely green facility, the museum will have wind turbines on the roof and will generate its own electricity.

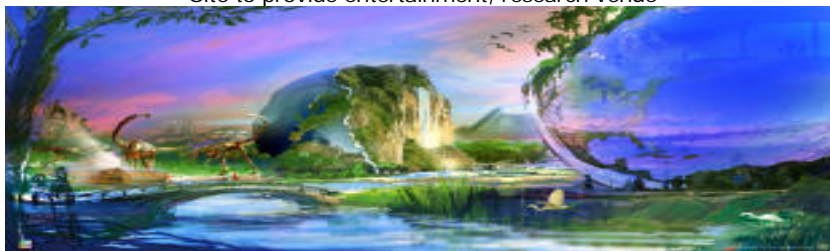
The total project is expected to include rides, a water park, a high-rise hotel and conference center, and more. It is anticipated to provide more than 2,700 jobs, plus thousands of construction jobs, and draw about 2.5 million visitors annually. The price tag has grown to 10 times the first-reported amount.

"Phase 1 is \$50 million," said Dill. "The project is now somewhere north of \$500 million."

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Film adviser will design theme park in New Caney

Site to provide entertainment, research venue



By KATHERINE ECHOLS
Chronicle Correspondent
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Plans are moving forward for "Dino" Don Lessem's Earth Quest Adventure Zone, a dinosaur-themed education and entertainment venture to open in New Caney by 2012.

Both the East Montgomery County Improvement District and Gov. Rick Perry are working hard to ensure that this project succeeds, officials said.

Perry recently signed House Bill 4015 to create a tax zone that will help finance the estimated \$500-\$600 million project. This tax will be included in the park's entry fee, said Frank McCrady, CEO of the East Montgomery County Improvement District.

Earth-friendly park

Lessem is a paleontologist, author and consultant who was an adviser for the Stephen Spielberg blockbuster Jurassic Park. His pet project has been called a dinosaur park, a dinosaur city and a theme park, but his concept for the park has remained relatively the same.

Don Holbrook, who is in charge of site selection and economic development for the New Caney area park, said Lessem envisions Earth Quest Adventure Zone as an earth-friendly park that will provide education through entertainment, create a renewed interest in dinosaurs and make Houston a premier dinosaur center.

This entertainment venue will not only educate park visitors about dinosaurs, but also about the relationship that human beings have with their planet, its animals and even technology, Holbrook said.
Hotel, theater planned

When Earth Quest Adventure Zone is completed, it will cover 250 acres north of Caney Creek and include dinosaur-themed exhibits, a hotel complex and spa and a theater complex tied to the hotel.

In addition, the park also will house a working research laboratory and the world's largest collection of dinosaurs and dinosaur bones. Holbrook said Earth Quest will be a center for dinosaur resources, research and education.

Further additions to the park are still being considered and may eventually include an immersive aquatic experience, animals, and an educational and entertaining online computer game that would allow participants to continue their gaming experience during their visit to Earth Quest.

Linking the park with a game would "put bricks and mortar to the online game experience," Holbrook said. Not only does Earth Quest Adventure Zone represent Lessem's love of paleontology and his desire to share his passion through education, but it also represents his environmental conscience, Holbrook said. The park will be engineered so that it can use alternative energy systems.

"As a green park or green zone, it will demonstrate how we can live in harmony with the environment and, whenever possible, offset (our) ties to fossil fuels," Holbrook said. "People really respect (Don) because he does what he says he'll do."