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Planners think big for park plan

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A proposed expansion of Fort Meade's Outdoor Recreation area has planners thinking big, city officials learned last week.

The Historic Fort Meade Outpost, a proposed outdoor recreation area, has been under study for more than a year and what started out four years ago as a simple idea for camping and horseback riding has evolved into a 450-acre historical and cultural-themed attraction, with high expectations of transforming Fort Meade into a worldwide destination.

Nearly four years ago, the city proposed an expansion of its Outdoor Recreation Center as a way to better provide for economic development. After receiving a USDA grant, a feasibility study was conducted to determine the direction for the expansion; that study and its findings are now complete.

The end result of this study has been described by Glenn Clover, the project's consulting engineer, as "a momentous point on a momentous path" for Fort Meade.

One of the critical turning points for this project came about during an early meeting by Clover with representatives with Polk County Tourism and Sports Marketing. They suggested focusing the project along the water and turning it into a themed destination.

"We modified the site plan at that point and it took us in directions that we never expected," Clover said. "Fort Meade is on the cusp of something major."

Clover recalled one inspirational lunch he had with Tom Park of Streamsong Resort and his world renowned golf architects at Double RR Cafe. The lunch may have been simple, but to Parks, who has traveled all over the world, his visit to this small town was something completely new to him, and claimed that the city had the potential of becoming a worldwide destination.

The central attraction for this project would be a historical area located near the park entrance on the eastbound side of U.S. 98. This area would contain replicas of buildings, such as a country store reminiscent of the city's pioneer days, and would feature crafts, exhibits, and demonstrations that would immerse guests into an entertaining and educational historic experience.

Another major attraction would be an equestrian center with a 20-stall stable and 100,000-square-foot multi-purpose building that will provide opportunities for horseback riding and hosting equestrian-related events.

Other additions to this project could include a new kayak and canoe launch, a 100-room hotel with restaurant and coffee shop, a resort area for camping and RV parking, and a 10-acre solar farm.

David Balber was brought on board with the project as an architect three years ago. When he was presented with the survey by the landscaping architect, he suggested that they could do far more for the project than simply camping or horseback-riding.

To him, the project has the same potential as Walt Disney World, which once started as a few acres of bare land before being transformed into the worldwide destination it is today.

“What Disney does great is that when people go there, they never want to leave, they want to spend money and sleep there and do whatever activity is exciting to them,” Balber said.

Balber has nothing but grand expectations for the project as something more than simply an equestrian center — which he feels has the possibility of becoming the equestrian center of the south, if not the entire country.

His dreams for the project are big. He conceives it as starting out small with the equestrian center, and then, once that generates enough revenue, creating space for camping before expanding its lodging with cabins and an RV park, and ultimately culminating with a shopping center and hotel.

While all of these suggestions are only ideas that are not fully designed, they help provide a vision for the project to help unify it.

“All of these things start to come together and form a sense of place as opposed to have something that is an afterthought that is just land great for horseback-riding,” Balber said. “This is the time to really take our time and think what it can be.”

Mark Jackson of Polk County Tourism and Sports tends to remain grounded with a more pragmatic approach to the project.

“There is a difference between wants and needs, and I think what was mentioned earlier was that we needed to separate the wants and the needs out,” Jackson said.

Still, the county has identified the project as a priority for development in coming years, indicated Jackson.

Jackson wants to focus on an aspect original to Fort Meade, creating an experience that would not end up as another trite Orlando-style attraction.

“Travelers are seeking unique experiences that truly are distinct,” Jackson said. “When it comes to entertainment, there is a lot of homogenized attractions in Orlando. People want something different. They want a real authentic Florida experience.”

For the outpost project, Jackson suggested focusing on the city’s rich history and heritage, which is uniquely distinct within all of Polk County, and would make for an excellent selling point as “heritage tourism” is trending.

“(We’re) trying to figure out what is the best thing that will provide the best return in our investment and provide Fort Meade with worldwide visibility,” Jackson said. “That is part of that vision. You have the assets to make this worth it.”

If fully built out, the overall cost for this project is estimated at approximately \$84 million. As to how it will be funded, Clover said that they are considering their options, which range from hosting legacy projects to seeking grants and donations.

When City Commissioner Bob Elliot inquired where the city goes from this point, Clover replied that they are only beginning to figure that out.

County Commissioner Melony Bell has been on board with the project and serves as the connection between it and public and private coffers. Through her efforts, she has remained vigilant establishing connections to help bring the project into fruition and claims she will continue these efforts well into the future.

“We started this three years ago trying to figure out how to make this a reality,” Bell said. “I am excited to be part of this, and I will do everything to bring people to the table.”