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BY LYNN McCLURE



n the waterfront

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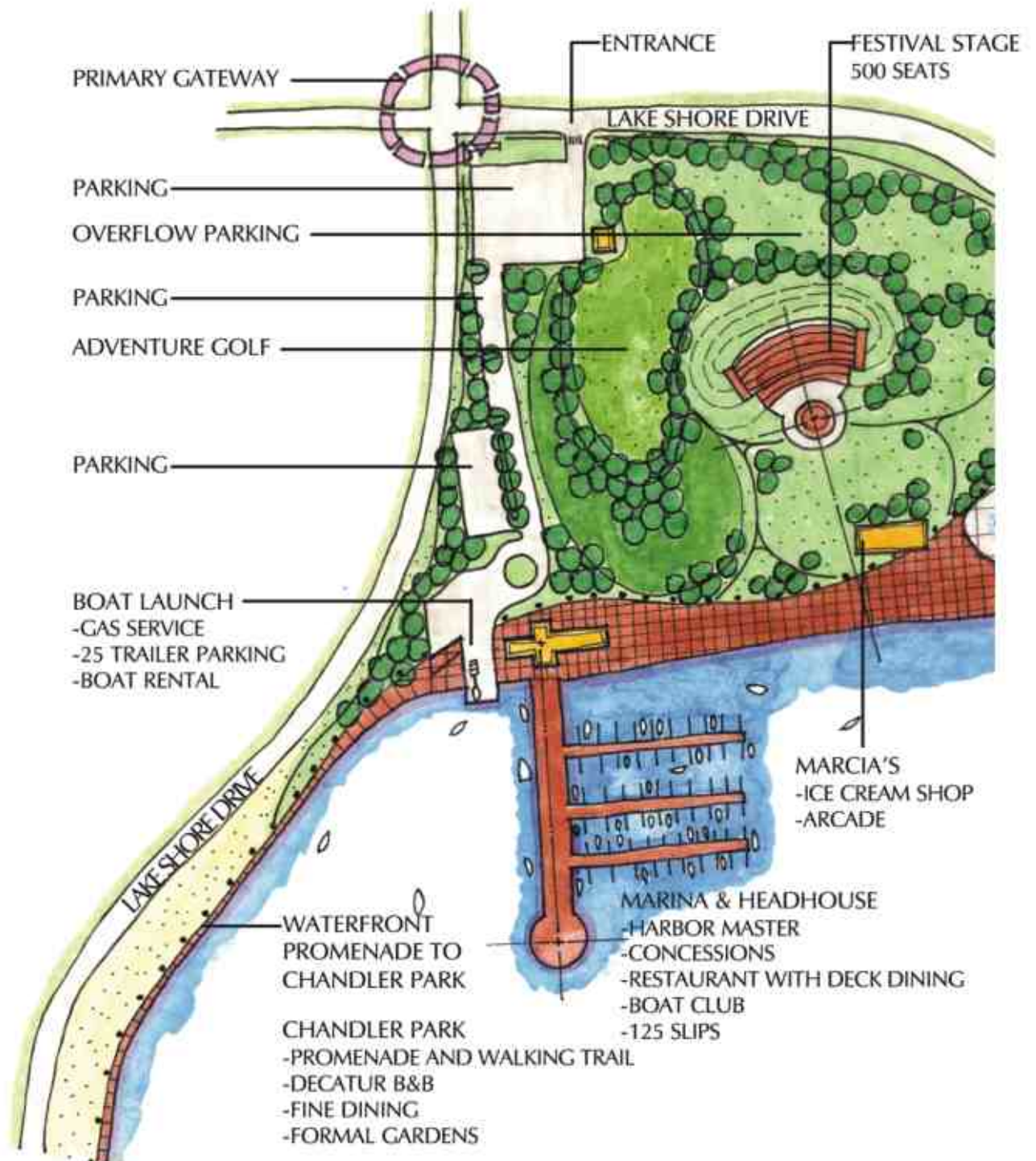
Warm breezes blow as a family strolls along the promenade from the park to the lakefront. Ducks swim right up to their feet, unimpeded by boat slips. Sweet strains of music float from the festival stage. The children run ahead to wet their bare feet in the large spray park next to the new playground and sand play area. Ice cream vendors hawk their wares. And the low moan of the ferryboat whistle can be heard: “Last call for passengers to the Zoo and Children’s Museum.”

This could be Lake Decatur — as seen through the eyes of a Chicago-based landscape architecture firm and the Decatur Park District.

The park district recently completed a master plan update with national landscape architecture firm, JJR. The plan encompassed a complete review of all neighborhood parks, facilities, and programs provided by the district.

“The public identified the lakefront as being a priority for the plan,” says Bill Clevenger, Decatur Park District executive director. “When we did interviews with community leaders and focus groups with the public, it was a recurring theme: We want new things to do at the lakefront.”



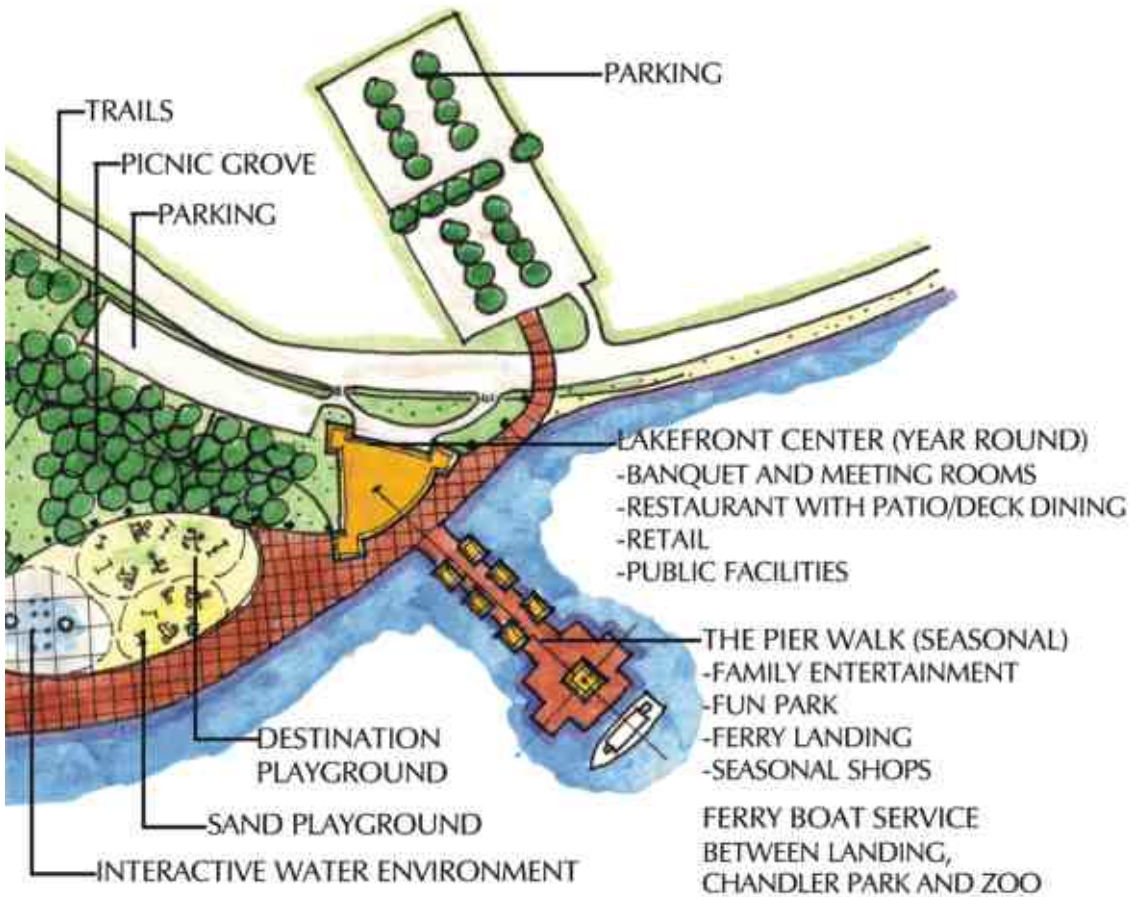


But housed within demands for new activities and destinations was another message. “Don’t overdevelop,” adds Clevenger. “People really value access to the lakefront.”

The master planning process began in mid-2003 with the selection of landscape architecture firm JJR, the same company that developed the park district’s 1995 master plan. The lakefront concepts developed from listening to public input, park board and district staff planning, and looking at the overall lake.

“The lake is truly under appreciated in the community,” says Paul Wiese, JJR Vice President and lead planner on the Decatur project. “There are not a lot of public access points, and some of the activities that do occur around the lake are not set up for a wide age range of users. We want to change that.”

JJR, which has been instrumental in planning such waterfront projects as Chicago’s Navy Pier revitalization and Milwaukee’s downtown lakefront development, conceived two distinct lakeshores with two very different themes. The



Decatur Landing Preliminary Budget (2004 dollars)

Parkland: Site preparation, grading, utilities, planting, entry gateway, signage, limited irrigation and soft costs
\$3,100,000

Waterfront Promenade: 15-foot wide paving, stone revetment, benches, trash receptacles, pedestrian lights and soft costs
\$3,420,000

Marina, Headhouse and Launch Ramp: 10-foot wide main dock, finger piers, utilities, renovation to existing building, renovation to existing launch ramp, fuel station and soft costs
\$5,087,500

The Pier Walk: Paving, stone revetment, handrail, benches and trash receptacles, pedestrian lighting, bollard lighting, seasonal retail shops and soft costs
\$4,447,500

Playgrounds: Site preparation, utilities, grading, mulch surfacing, sand surfacing, paving for water playground, play equipment, benches and trash receptacles, sculptural elements for water playground and soft costs
\$3,325,000

Festival Stage: Site preparation, utilities, grading, planting, built-in backless seating, stage, paving, pedestrian lighting and soft costs
\$1,300,000

Parking for marina and pier: Site preparation, grading, utilities, paving and base course, curb and gutters, lighting and soft costs
\$1,425,000

Buildings: Renovation to Marcia's Waterfront building, site preparation, new building construction for Lakefront Center, site development adjacent to buildings, utilities and soft costs
\$4,200,000

Total:
\$26,305,000

proposed Decatur Landing is a recreation and entertainment destination for residents and visitors to Lake Decatur at Nelson Park. And Decatur Cove capitalizes on the beauty of Sportsmans Park to create a natural area and wildlife habitat along the lakeshore.

The Landing project represents an entire reworking of the lakefront. A paved promenade would connect Chandler Park near St. Mary's Hospital to the lakefront. Because of its quiet setting and rolling hills, JJR has suggested formal gardens and the possibility of a bed and breakfast for the park. "There has to be something at Nelson Park to be a magnet for visitors," says Wiese. "Scovill Zoo and the Children's Museum are already doing the right things. We need to take that concept and expand it."

Among other things, planners recommended an upgraded marina. Currently, boat slips line the lakeshore from the sailing beach and Chandler Park all the way to the building in which Marcia's Waterfront Restaurant is located. This severely limits public access to the shoreline. The new plan suggests changing the configuration by building a marina that juts out into the harbor. The 125-slip marina could include concessions and a boat club with deck dining.

A special play area for children featuring a spray pad interactive water playground, swings, other

playground equipment, and a sand park is sketched in east of the marina. A new 500-seat festival stage may be built on a grassy hill overlooking the lake to replace the small bowl-like stage.

A lakefront center with banquet and meeting rooms, small specialty shops, and public restrooms is designed to replace the building where a host of restaurants — most recently Steak on the Lake — have been located.

And a pier walk with family entertainment, seasonal shops, and possible parasailing and jet-ski rental is planned for the pier near Nelson Park Road. The biggest attraction for the pier would be a ferryboat service to take visitors from Nelson Park to Scovill Zoo and the Children's Museum just across the lake.

"Our desire was to link Nelson Park, Chandler Park, and the Zoo," says Wiese. "Right now, the Zoo is a jewel near the lake, but it doesn't really capitalize on the lakefront. That's where the idea of a ferry came in."

Financial experts also were brought to the table. Among them was Economics Research Associates (ERA), a firm that has worked previously with the park district on operational

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structure. Dan Martin, ERA vice president, agrees with Wiese that expanding on the success of the Children's Museum and Scovill Zoo would bode well for the proposed Decatur Landing.

"Part of taking the long view of Lake Decatur development is understanding that it has to serve the local community," says Martin. "The lakefront activities must have the market support of people in the immediate area because only they will come to make the businesses there successful. The lakefront must have a variety of repeatable experiences that appeal to a broad age range of visitors."

ERA has provided planning for about 40 waterfront projects, including Chicago's Navy Pier, Baltimore Harbor, and projects in New Orleans, Seattle, and San Diego. Unlike projects in those cities, however, ERA and JJR have not suggested any conference hotels or other large-scale commercial development for Decatur's lakefront.

"Part of the reason we are careful in Decatur is because of lessons we have learned in a lot of smaller cities," says Martin. "Cities like Toledo, Ohio, and Norfolk, Virginia, tried to overdevelop. They didn't have a tourism market and tried to create one, so businesses along the waterfront in those cities didn't make it."

In the eyes of financial experts, focusing on resident markets is important, which fits with the park district's mission.

"We are here to protect and preserve public assets in parks and recreation," says Clevenger. "We have some public/private partnerships with local business and other organizations, and we will certainly create some new ones at the lakefront. But closing off sections of the lakeshore to the public in order to create a hotel or other large-scale development flies in the face of our core mission."

Some revenue centers will be important to the lakefront's success, as the cost to build Decatur Landing according to JJR's vision could run in excess of \$27 million. And because the City of Decatur owns and operates the marina, they may figure into the financial picture.

"We have been shown preliminary plans by the park district, and will be anxious to hear more once those plans become specific," says Decatur City Manager Steve Garman. "For years, the city has said the Decatur lakefront is one of this community's most underutilized assets, and that something must be done to bring more people to what is arguably one of the most beautiful points in the city.

"I would imagine the toughest thing for the park district to do will be to secure financial backing for a project of this size and scope," Garman adds. "Most often in these cases, private financiers or developers represent the best course for satisfying this need as, for the most part, public funds are stretched thin to cover escalating costs."

The next step, however, is to sit for a while as the park district prioritizes new ideas in the master plan within its budget. Projects with a high priority, such as the lakefront plan, need a combination of tax dollars, grants, and private money to become reality.

Chris Riley, Decatur Park Board President agrees: Financing these concepts will be a challenge.

"We'll have to go slowly and be selective about what we develop, with an eye toward balancing the creation of revenue centers and free family entertainment at the lakefront," Riley says. "By the time all is said and done, we will need every player involved in this project, as it benefits everyone in the community.

"And without a dream, you never get anywhere."

Decatur-based public relations strategist and freelance writer Lynn McClure shares her expertise with park and conservation agencies statewide.