

Effort for 132-acre recreation complex has support



Kristen Nicole Sayres/Special to The Commercial Appeal Corinne Derenberger, founder of Ryan's Hope, pushes her son Ryan on a swing at the recently-completed Ryan's Place universal playground at W.C. Johnson Park. Derenberger's next project is Ryan's Ranch, a retreat with two lakes, trails, an equestrian center, meeting site, playground.

By Tom Bailey Jr.
Contact
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The campaign to turn 132 acres of public land into a semi-private recreation complex experienced a near perfect start at Collierville Town Hall this week.

Not only did aldermen express no concerns about the concept of Ryan's Ranch, several threw their unbridled – if informal at this stage – support behind it.

"We need to do whatever we can do to make it work," Mayor Linda Kerley said.

"It's not going to cost taxpayers anything."

Alderman Tom Allen said the Ryan's Hope organization "is one of the most wonderful programs in Collierville."

Ryan's Hope provides respite care, recreation and advocacy for families who have children with physical or mental disabilities.

And Allen pledged "100 percent" support for the organization's most ambitious project yet.

Ryan's Hope didn't depend on luck when it made its presentation at Town Hall Tuesday.

It arrived backed by an array of professionals helping to plan Ryan's Ranch, including architects, planners, landscape architects, bankers and real estate agents.

It handed out a color booklet filled with information, including timelines, fund-raising plans, map, goals, project team members, facility descriptions and even a "communication plan."

The centerpiece of the ranch would be an equestrian center with barn, stables, indoor and outdoor arenas, pasture and trails.

It would provide therapeutic horse riding, in which riding skills are taught, and hippotherapy, which uses the horse's movement to aid physical therapy.

The preliminary, draft document of facilities and programs also includes a welcome lodge with dining for 100, event center with seating for 750, cabins, fishing lakes, campground and more.

The big goal is to make life a little more fun for families with children who have disabilities.

They experience so much stress that the vast majority are broken by divorce, Derenburger said.

But Ryan's Ranch will be marketed to able-bodied families as well.

The "high-end" development also will seek corporate customers for conferences and retreats.

The idea is to provide subsidized recreation for impoverished families and make a profit from people and companies that can pay.

The goal is to eventually make Ryan's Ranch self-sustaining, Robin Markle of Regions Bank told aldermen.

Access to the complex will be controlled, Derenburger said in an interview Wednesday.

"We might run it like the zoo. You join the zoo with a membership or you can pay to get in. And one day with free access."

The organization will need the revenue to be self-sustaining, she said, adding, "We've got to offset our costs somehow."

Membership fees may be based on a sliding scale related to income.

Ryan's Ranch also will need to control access because of legal liability issues, she said.

"If somebody comes on there and gets hurt, somebody who is just wandering on the property, we could be sued," Derenberger said.

Her nonprofit organization has not yet announced the projected cost to develop Ryan's Ranch.

But Markle described a fund-raising plan to solicit donations, sell naming rights, charge fees and forge partnerships.

The town leases the former demolition landfill from the Shelby County Conservation Board.

The town would have to give control of the property to Ryan's Hope.

And Ryan's Hope will try to seek federal funds to cap the old landfill so it can be developed.

In addition to fund-raising, the organization also will have to seek approval for the development through town boards.

The property is bounded by the Crosswind, Braystone Park, Oakmont and Longwood neighborhoods.

Ryan's Hope has made contact with each of the neighborhood associations, Derenburger said.

"They were for it. ... The joke has been it's either going to be Ryan's Ranch or the Shelby County bus barn," she said.

If everything goes well, Derenburger said, Ryan's Ranch could open as soon as 2010.

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