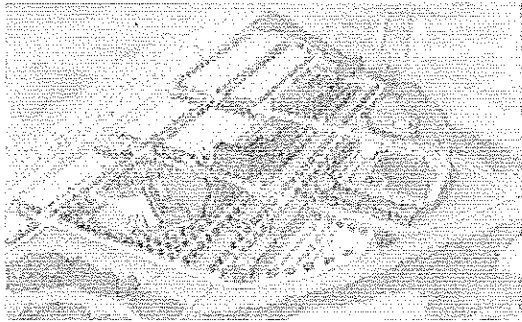


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Sugar Land pursuing a field of dreams

If entertainment district proposal passes council today, it'll be on November's ballot

By ERIC HANSON
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SUGAR LAND — This ever-growing Fort Bend County city has no Minute Maid Park or Jones Hall or George R. Brown Convention Center.

But, with voter approval, those well-known Houston landmarks could have smaller counterparts on 52 acres next to the Brazos River.

Sugar Land City Council is considering a measure to create an entertainment district that would include among other things, a concert hall, minor league baseball stadium and a hotel-convention center.

If council approves the item at its regular meeting today, the measure would be put on the November ballot.

The proposed district is similar to what is being done in other Texas cities, particularly in the Dallas area.

Sugar Land leaders say the district offers a place where locals can go for fun and entertainment without having to leave the city.

"The goal we have always had is to try and create a community where people can live, work, play and be educated and do all of those things within that community," said former Sugar Land Mayor Dave Wallace, co-chairman of the committee studying the project.

However, city officials also want to attract nonresidents to the venues to bring in dollars and thereby boost the local economy.

Former City Council member Cyril Hosley, co-chairman of the committee, said the district has great economic potential.

"It is going to bring so much to Sugar Land, more than just another retail shopping center or just another restaurant," she said.

Hosley said she had expected some opposition to the project, but none has surfaced. She said there have been concerns about traffic but said parking lots should empty quickly after events are finished.

"You are not talking about Reliant Stadium with 70,000 people," she said.

Before embarking on the project, committee members visited other cities, including Round Rock and Frisco, to see how life was affected by entertainment venues.

"What we saw was a tremendous entertainment value for the community," Wallace said. "We saw families with children, we saw active older adults that were all engaged in entertainment."

Grand Prairie is a city that has several entertainment and recreational venues and has created a viable tourist industry.

The city of 158,000 is home to the minor league baseball Grand Prairie AirHogs, the Lone Star Park horse racing track, a water park and other amenities.

"That is what we call our entertainment district. They are all together all in one place," city spokeswoman Amy Sprinkles said.

Sprinkles said being next door to Arlington with its Six Flags park and the Texas Rangers ballpark has helped bring about 6 million visitors annually to the city.

Meanwhile, no firm estimate of costs for Sugar Land's project have been made, but Wallace said Round Rock spent between \$25 million and \$30 million.

"The price tag could vary greatly," he said.

Sugar Land's funding plan for the complex does not allow property taxes to be used. Instead, sales taxes and other venue-related taxes would finance the project.

Voters will not specifically approve the creation of the district but rather would authorize the expansion of Sugar Land Development Corp. sales taxes and venue-specific taxes to pay for it. The Sugar Land Development Corp. levies a half-cent sales tax for economic development purposes. Officials said the ballot measure is similar to a 1998 vote that allowed the city to participate in the expansion of U.S. 59.

The election would also include the adoption of three special venue taxes — a ticket tax, a parking tax applicable only in the entertainment district and a citywide increase in the city's hotel occupancy tax from 7 percent to 9 percent.

"If you use it, you pay for it. If you don't use it, you don't pay for it," Wallace said of the entertainment district facilities.

The district will feature five basic parts, said Joe Esch, executive director of the city's business and intergovernmental relations office.

Esch said plans call for an indoor concert hall of about 6,500 seats, the baseball stadium, a hotel-conference center, a festival site and a cultural arts facility. The entertainment district would adjoin a park that is being constructed along the banks of the Brazos River. The complex would be erected on land owned by the University of Houston-Sugar Land.

Esch said the size of the stadium would be determined by what type of team plays there.

But before the city moves forward on attracting a team, much work has to be done with the Houston Astros.

Wallace said the city cannot talk to a major league baseball team about locating an affiliated minor league club in Sugar Land without first discussing it with Astros management.

The Astros' territorial rights cover Fort Bend County and Sugar Land, and a minor league team that was affiliated with a major league club could not be located there without the Astros' approval.

Sugar Land Mayor James Thompson said the proposed minor league ballpark is a topic that generated a lot of conversation around town.

"By far the majority of the people I have spoken with have shown enthusiasm particularly for the indoor (concert hall) entertainment and the ball park," Thompson said.