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County followed City of Georgetown's wishes in East Bay Park plans

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County Administrator

We at Georgetown County were surprised recently by remarks from some City of Georgetown officials to the effect that the county has been unwilling to make improvements at East Bay Park.

The county and the city have long had, and continue to have, a good working relationship, at least from the county's perspective. The county has been completely willing to allow the city to guide the direction of development and activities at the park, which is demonstrated by the projects currently planned for the park in the county's Capital Improvement Plan. Those projects were dictated several years ago by city officials, who wanted the park to be reserved for passive recreational activities and open space. Additionally, the county has demonstrated a willingness to alter plans for the park as opinions shifted over the years.

To clarify the county's position on East Bay Park and help the public understand fully how current plans for the park came about, the following sequence of events is offered:

Conversations about the future of East Bay Park date back to at least June 2007, when the county was in the midst of Visions II, which later developed into the Capital Improvement Plan. The city, at that time, was working with a consultant, Ken Simmons, and a task force to put together a master plan for Morgan Park. Among the goals of the plan was a coordination of the planning for East Bay and Morgan parks. Ernie Nance was chairman of the task force, while Brendan Barber was a member of the task force. Lynn Wood Wilson was Mayor of Georgetown and Steve Thomas was the city administrator. Keith Wilson of Keep Georgetown Beautiful was also involved in the endeavor as staff.

In December of that year, Georgetown County Council formally adopted the Capital Improvement Plan. I was the council chairman and would take over as county administrator a few months later upon the retirement of Tommy Edwards.

In conversations with Mayor Wilson and Steve Thomas during that period, they asked questions regarding plans for the development of East Bay Park. We wanted to do whatever the city wanted to do, but we needed to figure out where we were going to place the components for our regional parks. I was told in no uncertain terms that the focus for the East Bay area was to be on Morgan Park. City

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officials wanted East Bay to be a passive recreation destination for walking, fishing and those types of activities.

We had no problem with that and were happy to participate in providing the “passive element,” so off we went.

The county began working in that direction, approving as part of the Capital Improvement Plan a \$100,000 line item for Morgan Park under “community enhancements.” That line item is still included as a placeholder in the plan, although funding was pushed back outside the plan’s time frame once the city changed its vision for the park.

As time passed and the county moved forward with its planned annual updates of the Capital Improvement Plan, the city experienced a change in leadership. Steve Thomas left his position in the fall of 2008 and was replaced by Chris Eldridge in early 2009. In August 2009, Jack Scoville was elected Mayor and stepped into his new role the following January.

It was after that, in 2010, that discussion arose again about plans for East Bay Park. City officials, again, wanted to know what was in store for East Bay. The county’s plans hadn’t changed and the city’s new leadership was brought up to date on the guidance county officials had previously been given regarding the park. However, the city now wanted to go in a new direction. Plans for Morgan Park had been set aside, so following the city’s wishes, the \$100,000 line item for Morgan Park was pushed back at the next review of the Capital Improvement Plan.

In 2011, Scoville brought up a desire for a dog park at East Bay. The City administrator indicated to county officials that the city’s budget might provide some resources for a dog park and other improvements at East Bay. There was also talk about a shade system around the playground and the area where the Farmers Market is set up on Saturdays. The possibility of converting the road around East Bay Park for one-way traffic was also introduced as a means of creating an area for walking, biking and skating.

Those items were incorporated into the county’s plans for the park in response to the wishes of the city’s administration.

When Eldridge stepped down last year and Carey Smith took over as acting city administrator, the question of East Bay Park’s future was again raised. What followed was a meeting between Smith and his assistant and county staff including myself, Beth Goodale, the county’s recreation director, and David Gantt, the county’s capital projects manager. The result was the development of a conceptual plan that included a dog park and conversion of the road around the park to a one-way street.

However, that meeting also led to the addition of a tennis component at East Bay Park at Smith’s urging. Tennis courts for the Georgetown region had up until that point been planned for 8 Oaks Park, in keeping with the city’s request for only passive activities at East Bay. Plans for the courts were changed to accommodate the city’s request and the courts are currently scheduled to be constructed at East Bay, with funding available in 2017.

That’s where we were until two weeks ago.

The county has always been clear in its position that it is willing to provide recreational opportunities at East Bay Park for residents of the city and all areas of the county, and that it is willing to allow the city to guide the direction of those opportunities. That has not changed.

The county has never given any indication that it wishes to end the lease agreement for East Bay Park. We see East Bay Park as a valuable resource for the residents of the city and surrounding areas. We’ve tried to listen to the city and respond accordingly.

Additionally, it should be noted that East Bay Park receives a considerable level of use in its current state.

The county is willing to continue management of East Bay Park, but if the city's administration wishes to end the agreement, the county will again accommodate the city's desires in that area, as well as in regard to the tennis courts currently planned for the park. Funding for the courts will remain in place in the Capital Improvement Plan, and the county is willing to leave the courts at East Bay Park, or move them to 8 Oaks Park, where they were placed in original plans.

The County's current Capital Improvement Plan contains projects totaling more than \$22 million to serve the residents of the City of Georgetown and the surrounding areas. These projects, many of which have been completed, include:

- 8 Oaks Park – baseball/softball
- South Island Park – multipurpose fields/ playground
- Beck Gym renovation
- Howard Gym renovation
- Howard Auditorium renovation
- Street paving projects
- Carroll A. Campbell Marine Complex
- Tennis courts
- Swimming pool
- Library improvements – Heritage Center

Georgetown County worked hard to ensure the Capital Improvement Plan includes projects that would improve the quality of life for residents in every region of the county and we believe that was accomplished. Through the plan, the county will continue to provide recreational opportunities to City residents — the same as it will to residents of every other region of the county — regardless of what happens with the lease agreement for East Bay Park.