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Rendering of Grand Park
provided by City of Frisco

Frisco Plans Grand Park

By Lee Ratliff

Today, the land surrounding Stewart Creek is just scrub brush, oak trees and a few open fields. But in the not-so-distant future, this area bounded by Main Street, Legacy Drive, the Dallas North Tollway and Stonebrook Parkway may become an 850 acre “Grand Park” that may be home to a nature center, miles of recreational trails, ponds, and a dog park as well as specialty retail shops, a hospital, and even a four-year university. This is the vision presented to Frisco city leaders by the Urban Land Institute (ULI), a non-profit urban planning think-tank contracted by the city to brainstorm a mixed-use development strategy for the currently undeveloped tract.

As part of the ongoing update to the city’s Comprehensive Plan for public development, Frisco signed a contract with ULI late last year to perform the study. The council approved the contract for \$110,000 in November. This money paid for the ULI’s expenses to send an eight-person team with support staff for a five-day intense study. The team was composed of

volunteer ULI members with expertise in all areas of urban planning, including developers, environmental planners and landscape specialists. The team members, led by Senior Resident Fellow John McIlwain, took leave from their own businesses to donate their time for the project.

Over the course of their visit in mid-January, the ULI panel toured the city and the proposed project site and interviewed more than 50 Frisco “stakeholders” including landowners, developers, business owners and citizens before creating the initial recommendation, which was presented in a public meeting in January.

“The panel classified Frisco as a “boomburb” – a fringe suburb experiencing extremely rapid growth.”

Although the team’s charter was originally limited to a 650 acre tract, they believed the city should expand the scope to 850 acres. “The ULI likes to paint outside the lines,” explained McIlwain, saying the city will only get one chance to set aside space for large

public areas and Frisco should not be timid in its ambitions. “Frisco has an opportunity to create something really unique,” said McIlwain, adding that similar projects in other cities have resulted in such icons as Central Park in New York and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. If civic pride is not motivation enough, he also said that projects such as these typically raise surrounding property values by as much as 30% compared to similar areas without the planned development. In addition, they attract developers, corporate employers and other economic growth engines.

The core of Grand Park would be the green spaces along Stewart Creek, including a car-accessible park area, but also a lengthy series of trails for biking, jogging and hiking. Playgrounds, botanical gardens, off-leash dog parks, wetland preserves and cultural facilities could all be included.

The panel classified Frisco as a “boomburb” – a fringe suburb experiencing extremely rapid growth. They compared Frisco to cities such as Glendale, Riverside, and Aurora - suburbs to Phoenix, Los Angeles and Denver respectively. They pointed out that progressive boomburbs such as Frisco could expect to follow a similar growth trajectory and eventually require the same public infrastructure, including regional transit, several major medical facilities and at least two four-year universities. The panel incorporated this critical infrastructure into the Grand Park recommendation, reserving space for a hospital and a 135-acre university campus. The panel was most emphatic about the need for

a four-year university, saying it would be critical in creating and retaining a highly educated workforce, which in turn would attract the most sought-after corporate employers. They suggested a proactive approach to marketing the site, targeting select universities to lure a top-tier institution.

The recommendation also calls for development of Main Street west of the Tollway to attract pedestrian friendly retail such as restaurants, galleries and antique shops. Between Main Street and the Stewart Creek nature area would be space for a hospital and university. West of Legacy and adjacent to the proposed development could be medium- and high-density housing as well as a “flex-tech” commercial zone to serve companies working with the university.

At this point, the ULI recommendation is more of a straw-man proposal serving as a vision to spark ideas within the community rather than a specific plan for development. ULI hopes that Frisco will build on the vision and borrow some of the ideas to create a homegrown plan that incorporates the needs of local residents, present and future. In fact, ULI team leader McIlwain emphasizes that the Grand Park concept is only a beginning. He says that a general rule of thumb for progressive cities is to provide six to eight acres of public green space per thousand residents. Therefore, as Frisco grows to a population of approximately 250,000 residents over the next 15 to 20 years, the city will need at least 1,600 acres of regional park, much more than provided by the proposed Grand Park. To this end, the panel also recommended acquiring a site for a 600 to 800 acre park in north Frisco on Panther Creek. The land for the so-called “Panther Creek Regional Park” should be acquired soon, while the land is available, but could be developed much later.

ULI suggests that funding for the project could come from several sources. While traditional municipal



Projected Park area and Interchange Rendering provided by City of Frisco

bonds would almost certainly play a role, additional funding could come from increased property tax revenue due to higher property valuations adjacent to the development. Also, ULI outlined a novel plan for creating a 150-acre recreational lake that could be used for fishing and boating, but would serve dual use as a storm water retention reservoir.

Normally, developers are responsible for providing storm water retention of approximately one acre for every ten acres of development. Without central planning, this might result in a haphazard series of small reservoirs. However, the 150-acre Grand Park Lake could serve as run-off retention for 1,500 acres of new development and the city could collect revenue in exchange for drainage rights.

“The recommendation also calls for the development of Main Street west of the Tollway to attract pedestrian friendly retail such as restaurants, galleries and antique shops.”

According to John Lettelleir, Frisco’s director of planning and development, city officials are currently holding a series of internal meetings to discuss the proposal, with the intention of recommending a portion of the plan to the city council sometime in the spring. Lettelleir believes the project may be scaled down from the ULI recommendation. He says the recommendation to the council may be for an area of between 450 to 500 acres bounded on the north side by Platinum Parkway rather than Main Street. “As with any plan, there will be tweaking, but I don’t see this as a plan that will sit idle,” said Lettelleir. “Once the target is in sight, the city tends to move quickly, as with the Dr. Pepper 7Up Ballpark, the Dr. Pepper StarCenter, Stonebriar Centre, Frisco Square and other projects.”

Lee Ratliff is a freelance writer living in Plano.