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Partners to tour Marsh Park in Fairfield

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FAIRFIELD — Outside of having a partial walking trail and fishing lake, much of what will be Marsh Park is a blank canvas for the city, MetroParks of Butler County and the Butler County Visitors Bureau.

Officials with MetroParks of Butler County have been at the property multiple times over the past year, but on Tuesday the visitors bureau will tour the park for the first time with city officials.

This meeting is seen as a first step of a lengthy partnership between the city and visitors bureau to help turn Marsh Park into a 170-acre crown jewel in the city's park system, which includes a 30-acre undeveloped parkland across River Road along the Great Miami River. In February, the city and MetroParks entered into a memorandum of understanding to not only work on developing Marsh Park, but to also collaborate on future projects.

The park is currently developed to the south as a fishing lake and park, but most of the property is to the north and remains a gravel and sand quarry. After more than five decades of gravel and sand mining, Martin Marietta is winding down its operations and in the process of restoring the property to a green space. A deal forged a half-century ago had the gravel mining company bequeathing the land to the city when it finished with the property.

Butler County Visitor Bureau executive director Mark Hecquet said he has yet to make it out to the property, but has seen plans and layouts. He's excited about the possibilities, he said, but there are two key areas to ensure the project's success: parking and accessibility.

"For the guest experience, accessibility to a venue is key," he said. "The ability to get large volumes of people in and out of a space is key to a successful event, as well as having a place where people can park when they get to an event."

After Tuesday, Fairfield City Manager Mark Wendling said he hopes they can start to form a shared vision about the future of the park. "The biggest thing is, 'How do we proceed?'" he said.

While each entity will bring to the partnership their own expertise — the city and MetroParks having history of developing parkland, and the city and Visitors Bureau having experience of bring people to the region — Wendling said a big question that needs to be addressed moving forward is, "What's going to be our first big endeavor?"

Wendling sees the first project being to finish the walking trail loop around the current lake, which he says would make the park a destination for walkers and runners.

But the park won't be fully developed until the transfer of property is complete between Martin Marietta and the city of Fairfield, which Wendling said could be in three to four years once the property is restored.

As it sits now, Marsh Park is a pay fishing lake and half-mile walking path.

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