

Details of park master plan unveiled

Challenges facing the project are funding and replacing outdated maintenance equipment.

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The Carriage House, one of the few extant structures in the park from the Coleman heyday, would house a museum and be suitable to host events like wedding receptions. (submitted)

Imagine quaint wedding receptions, a mile-long loop trail with informative panels depicting significant mansion sites from the past, and a venue for the widely popular disc golf at Lebanon's Coleman Memorial Park.

These are just some of the ideas that officials unveiled in the first draft of a master plan to improve the park Thursday night at Christ Presbyterian Church, located next to the entrance to the park. The overall theme will be based on the "historical core" of the park.

"This is a very unique place -- the park, the estate and the grounds," Simone said. "We think it's an important story to tell." This 100-acre, wooded park was home to several members of the Coleman family during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it was called Mt.



A sketch shows the layout of Coleman Memorial Park after improvements that a consultant said will cost "millions."

Lebanon. Iron and steel magnates who made their fortune from the nearby North Lebanon Foundry, the family was among the nation's wealthiest.

Bringing the park into the 21st century, however, will not be fast or easy, said Peter Simone, president of of Simone Collins Landscape Architecture of Berwyn, Chester County.

A team of consultants led by the company has been working on the plan since the summer, when they were hired by the Coleman Memorial Park board of trustees. The project has been led by an advisory committee of volunteers, and several meetings have been held to gather input from the public.

"It's a vision for the next 20 years," Simone told the crowd of the project that will be completed in phases. "And it's going to incur costs, and money will have to be raised."

Among the concepts proposed to create new uses within the park include renovating the historic Carriage House to include a museum exhibit and allowing it to be used as a rental facility for weddings, business meetings and other events.

Other proposals include settings for a new gazebo, a tree arboretum, and formal and informal garden spaces associated with the historic interpretation of the former Coleman family mansion sites.

The loop trail will include historical information at the sites of the several mansions that were demolished. As the principal members of the Coleman family died off, their survivors eventually moved, deeding the land and five mansions to the city in 1936. Upkeep of the mansions was expensive, and they were all eventually demolished, the last one in 1961.

Other proposed improvements include:

- More visible and user-friendly park entrances and exits.
- Eco-friendly renovations to the existing amphitheater.
- Circulation, parking and infrastructure improvements.
- Pedestrian connections, including trails and sidewalks to and within the park.
- Improvements to the existing miniature golf course and an addition of a disc golf course.
- Possible expansion for additional play fields.

Simone said the study being performed now is necessary to try to obtain grants next year from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

While the cost of the project is unknown right now, figures will likely become available in January.

"It will be millions of dollars. I'm not going to tell you it's going to be hundreds of thousands. It will be millions," Simone said.

Lebanon city councilman Tony Matula said while he is enthusiastic about the plan, he inquired whether there will be enough revenue to sustain it.

Simone said money from rentals and programs should bring in enough to cover maintenance, but not capital improvements. The amount of income will depend on the level of funding and how aggressively the park is marketed and rented.

The other challenge is outdated maintenance equipment and manpower to perform the work, said Pat Stasio, director of parks and recreation in Upper Moreland Township in Montgomery County.

Stasio suggested creating a daily, weekly, monthly and seasonal maintenance schedule, preparing an equipment condition and replacement schedule, identifying and preparing an underground utilities plan and performing a playground equipment and accessibility audit of all play areas.

If the ambitious plan is implemented and marketed aggressively, the renovations and expansion could create projects that would increase visitation to the park that would bring in a continuous revenue stream. The plan includes reating partnerships with organizations and school districts, offering summer camp programs and rentals.

"What's key is taking advantage of what you have," said Stasio.

The draft will be posted on the city and park websites after the meeting, and written comments will be accepted and incorporated into the final draft due out in the spring.

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