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Firms make pitch to design Bibb's recreation master plan

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By RODNEY MANLEY — rmanley@macon.com

Evident by Tuesday's first interview with the five firms bidding to design a recreation master plan was that officials had -- as one Bibb County commissioner described it -- "put the cart ahead of the horse."

The county, which took on management of recreation July 1 as part of service delivery strategy agreement with the city of Macon, has about \$40 million in recreation funding in the special purpose local option sales tax approved by voters last year.

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The problem is the SPLOST money is earmarked for specific facilities, many of which are outdated and might not be in the best locations.

"What this is pointing out is a flaw in the SPLOST program," Commissioner Lonzy Edwards said. "This would have been dead on in planning our SPLOST campaign. I don't think anyone thought of this up front."

The commission delayed a vote on a master planner until it meets next week, but its members reached a consensus -- that whichever firm is chosen should narrow its scope from a far-reaching plan to one that focuses more on immediate projects and improvements.

"I'm ready to go to work," SPLOST coordinator Len Hindsman told the board. "I do think we need a master plan, but there are parts of this that we can go ahead and address."

The SPLOST referendum earmarked funding for such big-ticket items as \$8 million for a new "Sub South Recreation Complex," \$6 million in new ball fields and improvements at Central City Park and \$4.3 million for a "New Rosa Jackson Center." However, it also guarantees millions of dollars for existing facilities such as Freedom, Bloomfield and Frank Johnson centers that might not best fit into a new master plan that considers the city's and county's changing demographics and growth patterns.

The presentations by the five firms did offer some insight for the commission. For instance, Lose & Associates of Lawrenceville pointed out that studies show that 11 percent of Bibb households do not have a vehicle for transportation. ZT3 Placemaker Studio, the only Macon company bidding for the job, noted that the county has seen a rise in both the number of residents under age 16 and the number over age 64.

Unlike many master plans, this won't be some "pie-in-the-sky" document "put on a shelf, never to be heard from again," said recreation director Dale "Doc" Dougherty. The almost \$40 million in SPLOST funds will ensure that this plan -- at least a Phase 1 -- would be put into action.

"My hope and expectations through these vendors is them not just giving us 100 pages of something that's never going to happen, but giving us 50 pages of exactly where we can go with this," Dougherty said.

The other companies bidding for the job are AMEC Environment & Infrastructure of Kennesaw; Wood & Partners of Tallahassee, Fla.; and Pond & Co. of Atlanta.

Under the new service delivery strategy, the county took on all parks and recreation services, which meant inheriting the city's eight recreation centers that Dougherty describes as more like "fellowship halls." He hopes the master plan will update the department into what he calls "Recreation 2020" and "get us out of this 'Recreation 1970s,' which is kind of what we have now."

"They're not really full-blown recreation centers," he said. "You've got eight of them in a very small area of our community. And now that we're a countywide department, we really have to look at things countywide, rather than just the city. We're looking at things on a much larger scale than we have in the past."

Some of the SPLOST decisions would be simple, such as giving the go-ahead to the \$1.25 million in upgrades at the John Drew Tennis Center. Others would require more thought and discussion. For instance, where does the county build the new south Macon complex? Is it feasible to renovate and operate the six swimming pools inherited from the city?

"Do we need them all?" Commission Chairman Sam Hart asked. "We don't want to get started with too much before we decide that."

Edwards expressed disappointment that the competing firms offered only "vague ideas on how to use recreation to deal with crime issues."

Though no recommendations were made, both Edwards and Commissioner Bert Bivins said they were impressed with the presentation by ZT3 and its partners, which included ideas and expertise about generating public-private partnerships.

Recreation can often take a back seat during budget negotiations, yet residents interact most frequently with government when they picnic in the park, play ball in a gym or watch a child play Little League or softball, Dougherty said.

"That makes this department really significant," he said. "And now they have the money to make significant changes to decades of, unfortunately, not neglect but just age. Without any funds you can't renovate a place. Now we have the funds to make change that is really needed."

To contact writer Rodney Manley, call 744-4623.

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SPLOST recreation projects

- New Sub South Complex: \$8.2 million
- Central City: \$6 million
- New Rosa Jackson Center: \$4.3 million
- Freedom Center: \$3.6 million
- Memorial Center: \$2.5 million
- Bloomfield Center: \$2.5 million
- New parks, rec office, senior citizens center (proposed for Central City Park): \$2 million
- Land acquisition for Sub South complex, future developments: \$2 million
- Filmore-Thomas Center: \$1.5 million
- Frank Johnson Center: \$1.3 million
- John Drew Tennis Center: \$1.25 million
- East Macon Center: \$985,000
- North Macon Center: \$820,000
- Purchase of equipment: \$653,000
- Lizella: \$500,000
- Tattall Square Park: \$500,000
- Mattie Jones Hubbard Park: \$100,000
- Henry Burns Park: \$95,000

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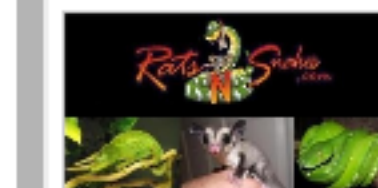
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