



Cleveland Rowing Foundation plan for Rivergate Park on the Cuyahoga River deserves support

By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer
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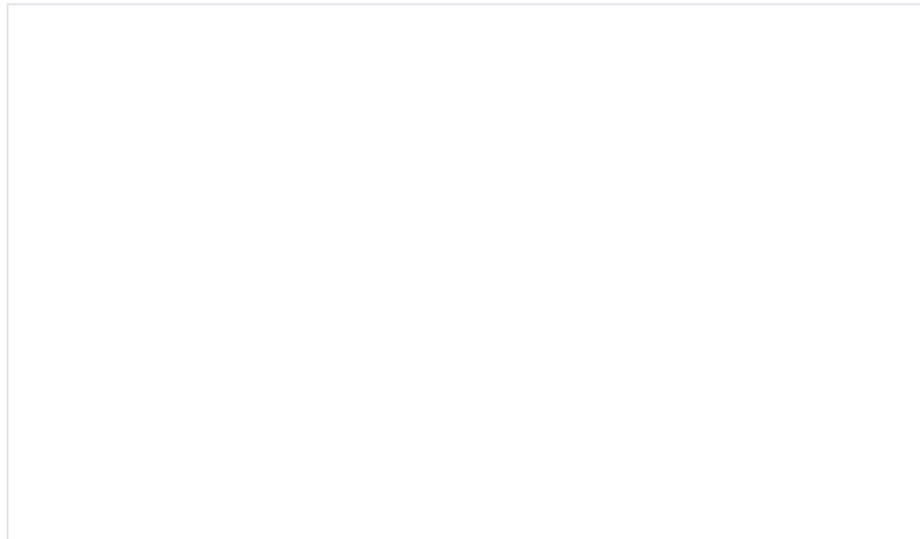
Kent State University Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative

A bird's-eye view created by the Kent State University Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative shows the Rivergate Park proposed by the Cleveland Rowing Foundation.

Good ideas can take forever to become a reality in Cleveland, especially when it comes to creating public access to Lake Erie or the Cuyahoga River.

But that's not always the case. For a short time, the nonprofit Cleveland Rowing Foundation has a stunning opportunity to create roughly seven acres of publicly accessible recreation and parkland on the Cuyahoga River, whose banks are largely off-limits.

If the organization can raise \$3.2 million by Wednesday, March 31, it can exercise an option to buy the riverfront property from the now-defunct Commodore's Club Marina on Columbus Road Peninsula, which decided to close last spring.





Thomas Ondrey/The Plain Dealer

B. Sauer passes through the shadows cast by the Center St. Bridge as he rows in the Mens Masters Final in the Head of the Cuyahoga rowing regatta on Sat.Sept. 19, 2009. Sauer was unaffiliated with any team.

The property is just south of the Detroit-Superior Bridge and north of the Columbus Road Bridge, opposite Irishtown Bend on the west bank of the Cuyahoga.

The rowing foundation could move operations to the new location as soon as next summer. It would also begin developing plans to turn the surrounding property into a regional venue for rowing, canoeing, kayaking and dragon boating, said Theresa Gang, the organization's executive director.

The property could become a permanent home for high school and collegiate rowing programs across Northeast Ohio, plus the Ohio City Bicycle Co-Op, Gang said. It would also be connected to a skate park next door proposed by the city of Cleveland, along with the adjacent Hart Crane Park.



Thomas Ondrey/The Plain Dealer

The team from Westerville entered in the Mixed Recreational 8+ category stows away its boat after competing at the Head of the Cuyahoga rowing regatta on Sat.Sept. 19, 2009.

The proposal, which the rowing foundation calls Rivergate Park, is an absolute no-brainer. It deserves quick and enthusiastic community support.

So far, however, the organization has raised \$322,000, or roughly 10 percent of the total, which means there's a long way to go -- fast.

The project has attracted high-profile support. The Ohio office of the Trust for Public Land, a national, nonprofit organization devoted to land conservation, obtained the option last May for \$8,200 and negotiated an extension of the original deadline from Dec. 31 to March 31.

Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson supports the project strongly, but the city may not be able to offer cash, said Chris Warren, Jackson's chief of regional development.

"We think it's a wonderful idea," he said. "We're trying to figure out a way to help them."

In other cities, from Pittsburgh to Buffalo and Oklahoma City, rowing has helped spur residential and retail development, and provided opportunities to participate in a sport that's growing increasingly diverse. Rowing at one time was an elite, esoteric pastime for a few along the Cuyahoga. No more. The rowing foundation, now in its 20th year, has grown from a small organization with only five members to an umbrella group of nine member organizations, including the adult Masters program associated with the U.S. Rowing Association, which develops the nation's Olympic rowing teams.



Thomas Ondrey/The Plain Dealer

An entry from the Western Reserve Rowing Association competes in the Womens Masters 2X category at the Head of the Cuyahoga rowing regatta on Sat.Sept. 19, 2009.

Secondary-school participants include the Cleveland Scholastic Rowing Association, Hawken School, Shaker Heights Crew, and the St. Ignatius High School Crew. College teams include crews from Baldwin-Wallace College and Case Western Reserve, Cleveland State and John Carroll universities.

Every rowing season, from spring to fall, more than 850 people participate in rowing activities along river, including the popular Head of the Cuyahoga Regatta, which attracts 3,000 people to the Flats.

For the past decade, the rowing foundation has occupied a rented boathouse on Scranton Road Peninsula, just upstream from the Commodore's Club property. The foundation has leased the Scranton property from Scranton Averell Inc., a trust that shares control of most land on that peninsula with Forest City Enterprises.

The foundation's tenancy on Scranton Peninsula is becoming increasingly tenuous, in part because the peninsula could become home to the Cleveland gambling casino approved by voters in November with the passage of Issue 3.

A more immediate concern is that rent at the Scranton facility will rise from \$85,000 to \$96,000 in 2010, consuming more than half of the foundation's operating budget of \$170,000.

Rivergate Park makes sense because it would be within a stone's throw of the future Canal Basin Park, envisioned by trail advocates as the northern trailhead of a 110-mile network of trails following the towpath of the old Ohio & Erie Canal. Perhaps the most compelling reason for the rowing foundation to move to the Commodore's Club site is that it's one of the few ideal places for rowing docks because it's on an inside bend where it's safe from ore boats serving steel operations upstream.

"We want to create a place where people have access to recreation on the river," Gang said. "Without a place of our own, we'll always be at the mercy of someone else."



Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau

Two years ago, rowing enthusiasts in Buffalo built the Fontana Boathouse on Black Rock Channel, based on 1905 plans by Frank Lloyd Wright for a boathouse at the University of Wisconsin that was never built.

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