



Going Vertical at Benderson Park

By Katy Bergen

katy.bergen@heraldtribune.com

SARASOTA -- In April — if all goes according to plan — visitors to Nathan Benderson Park will take in a brand new finish tower as the venue hosts the Olympic Trials in rowing. The structure, designed by Sarasota architect Guy Peterson and the Fawley Bryant firm, will feature a breezeway and upper deck, where spectators can gather at the finish line. Two separate stairways will lead to park offices, meeting rooms and a media center. If an NBC deal comes through with USRowing and the U.S. Olympic committee, television audiences will take in the site and the renowned course.

The \$5 million finish tower at Nathan Benderson Park is the first project in a series of “vertical” construction planned for the site of the 2017 World Rowing Championships. (A boathouse and amphitheater are next on the list.) And as officials break ground on the tower Thursday, it is the first project at the park — a \$30 million project funded primarily by state grants and Sarasota County tourist taxes — paid for solely by private dollars.

Until now, development at the park has relied on financial support from Sarasota County, the state of Florida, and on a smaller scale, Manatee County and Benderson Development, the real estate firm that has been involved with the park since its inception. But after pushing \$10 million to the park through 2014, the state twice rejected Nathan Benderson Park’s request for more funding, and some legislators expressed a desire to see a stronger private fundraising effort for park construction.

Funds raised by board members associated with the park’s year-old fundraising arm, the Nathan Benderson Park Community Foundation, will directly support the park finish tower. Based in the Benderson Development office building in Manatee County, the group has secured \$5.3 million through website donations, community groups and contributions from existing board members, said Joe Barbetta, a former Sarasota county commissioner who has worked for the foundation in an “administrative consulting” role since January. At least half of funds raised to date have come from the family of Benderson Development president Randy Benderson, the foundation’s chairman, whose father the park is named for and whose company has developed a luxury mall, retail spaces and a hotel on land adjacent to the sports venue.

Bob Whitford, operations manager for the Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates, the nonprofit group that operates the park, said finish towers, used to house judges and timing equipment during competitions, are often shut down when events are over. The Sarasota building will serve as a headquarters for park employees and have meeting rooms and small events spaces.

“We wanted something that is alive,” Whitford said. “We want something that is the function of our park.”

Though the finish tower may be the only structure that a world rowing championships technically cannot be held without, remaining structures — particularly a boathouse — are key to the park’s business plan and long-term goal of becoming self-sustaining.

Economic impact Park plans have the boathouse serving both as a community center and training facility for Olympic-caliber or collegiate athletes, and officials want to be able to show off such a building to the thousands of rowing enthusiasts who will travel to Sarasota in September 2017 for the World Rowing Championships. It would also be home to community programs promised by county officials and park employees at the park.

“We have to have (a finish tower) for the worlds — that’s a priority,” SANCA president Paul Blacketter said. “The boathouse is a luxury for the worlds. In world championships, you don’t always use the boathouse, as a matter of fact sometimes they close them. But our plan is to utilize the boathouse ... we want to show it off.”

To do that, foundation members need to come up with roughly \$10 million by next spring pay for the project. That estimate is part of the \$17 million park officials say they need to finish the



A rendering of the finish tower at Nathan Benderson Park.

(Courtesy photo)

the remaining major structures — a boathouse, grandstand, amphitheater and playground.

“We have to get into high gear for fundraising for the next building,” Barbetta said. “We’ve got this building paid for — now we move on.” He said the park will once again ask the state for funds, but that foundation members are actively looking for private donors. This month, Gulf Coast Community Foundation philanthropic specialist Scott Anderson joins the effort. He plans to develop a “major gifts” program that would target wealthy donors who might contribute millions in exchange for naming rights to park buildings or community programs, and has said he will not be paid by the foundation for his efforts.

In the meantime, Benderson Development has fronted the money for the design phase of the boathouse so that park officials can make an October deadline. The group also gives the SANCA roughly \$360,000 in annual support for expenses that Sarasota County does not cover in its operating agreement.

Anderson’s involvement with the park foundation, as well as another key hire at SANCA, could accelerate progress on a promise park officials have repeatedly made to county commissioners — that the organization can turn profits on park events without the support of Sarasota County by 2018.

In April 2014, Sarasota County agreed to pay maintenance, payroll and operating expenses for the park through an agreement that lasts until 2019. This summer, SANCA hired Sarasota sports director Nicole Rissler as chief operating officer and tasked her with marketing and exploring new ways to make money at the park.

When it comes to economic impact and driving sports tourism, Nathan Benderson Park officials deliver impressive numbers. Park officials calculate visitor spending created by park events for the 2014-15 year to be roughly \$26 million, double their initial projections for that year. The park has also landed TV deals for several elite competitions, including the World Cup Final in Modern Pentathlon held this year and the Olympic trials scheduled for April, that officials say boosts visibility for the area.

But currently, park officials lose money on events on the cost of renting equipment and supplies, such as grandstands, giant television screens and other equipment. According to Sarasota County financial statements, the park has billed the government roughly \$988,000 in expenses from April 2014, when its operating agreement was approved, through May 2015.

Officials have always contended that the park’s permanent structures — particularly a boathouse where patrons rent equipment or boat storage, participate in programs and host events in meetings spaces — are key to the park being self-sufficient.

“When the capital improvements are complete...when you have everything in place...it’ll be like renting Ed Smith Stadium,” Blacketter said. “It’s a self-sustaining business to host these events. The money we are getting now is to get to that point.”