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Vision for Depot Park is coming into focus

City OKs preliminary plan; contaminated soil being removed

By [Megan Rolland](#)

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As work begins at Depot Park to prepare the site for an intensive excavation of contaminated soil, the city of Gainesville has approved a preliminary plan for the park.

The plan includes the proposed Cade Museum, a museum of innovation named for the late inventor of Gatorade, Dr. Robert Cade; an interactive water feature; and an amphitheater.



Aaron E. Daye

Plans are still preliminary for what other features will go into the park, which is located south of downtown. The first step is to remove 150,000 tons of soil contaminated by petroleum and coal tar.

The process of excavating that soil into 40 dump trucks a day and shipping it to a specially designed toxic landfill in Georgia likely will last until December 2010, said Patty Hart, project services director with GRU strategic planning.

And then the actual vision - a redevelopment project that will not only be an area attraction but provide much-needed stormwater retention for future development downtown - will start to take place.

"It is and will be Gainesville's signature park for many, many years to come, and it should look and feel that way," said Anthony Lyons, director of the Community

Redevelopment Agency, which is working on designs for the park and acquiring grants to help fund the brownfield development.

The CRA Board, which is composed of Gainesville city commissioners, voted to move forward Monday with the landscape architecture firm Carol R. Johnson Associates' concept for the park.

"The next phase of design development is really homing in on what we want," Lyons said.

A master plan for the entire park - including the privately funded museum of innovation to be named in honor of the late Dr. Cade - will be completed by the time remediation work is finished.

"One of the parts I thought was really cool was on Southeast Third Street they would put some sort of interactive water feature," Commissioner Jeanna Mastrodicasa said. "There are a lot of things going on and I think it's designed for multiple people coming for different things."

Carol R. Johnson Associates proposed dividing the park into different zones that would offer various attractions.

Among those zones is the Historic Depot Building, which Lyons said will be moved back to its previous location just east of Main Street on Depot Avenue after the first phase of the remediation is completed. At that point, restoration of the building into a yet-to-be determined functioning element of the park will begin.

While all the funding details for that portion of the project are still being hammered out, the City of Gainesville received \$2.8 million from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Petroleum Cleanup Fund.

"For a while, the funding was in jeopardy, and then we heard that we got the funding, but it wasn't going to come until December," Hart said.

The state budget this year withdrew significant funds from the Petroleum Cleanup Program, threatening the funding of projects that otherwise scored high enough to receive money.

However, through the efforts of GRU and Mayor Pegeen Hanrahan, funding for the remediation was restored.

"We did manage to convince the Florida (Department of Environmental Protection)

that this should remain funded," said Hanrahan, who by all accounts played an instrumental role in getting the funding restored. "It was an important milestone, because in addition to not having to raise that money locally, I think it is a symbol of the state's acknowledgment that it's an important site."

In addition to the almost \$3 million coming from the state, GRU is committed to spending \$11.5 million on the remediation.

GRU did not cause the contamination at the site, but acquired the liability for the cleanup in the late 1990s.

"I think it's very beautiful," Hanrahan said of the latest schematics for the park. "The vision continues to evolve and probably the most exciting development we've had in the past year is the plans for the Cade Museum."

Hanrahan emphasized that redevelopment of the park alone will not drastically alter the industrial atmosphere that exists now south of downtown.

"Part of the challenge I think is to figure out how to time all of the park development relative to what's happening around the park," she said. "It's a symbiotic relationship."