Local & State

Massive park plan is approved

But this ‘crown jewel’ may cost a king’s ransom

By Jeff Burlaw
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Cascades Park, one of the signature projects of Blueprint 2000, is one step closer to reality.

On Monday, city of Tallahassee and Leon County commissioners unanimously approved the preliminary design of the 22-acre park, which stretches between Apalachee Parkway and South Monroe Street and includes walking and bicycle trails, greenspace and stormwater ponds to alleviate flooding.

However, Blueprint 2000, which pays for road and park projects with proceeds from a one-percent sales tax, doesn’t have enough money to complete the park. It currently has $26.3 million in the budget for construction, but the cost for all the proposed amenities would add tens of millions of dollars to the price tag.

Still, people reacted to the proposal with enthusiasm. Valerie Jean Conner, former board chair of the Tallahassee Trust for Historic Preservation, called it magnificent.

“It’s pretty clear to me that this is the most wonderful thing I’ve ever seen,” she said.

David Ramsay, chairman and CEO of SunTrust Bank, said the proposal will please everyone from environmentalists to business people.

“This can be our crown jewel,” he said.

Construction of the park is set to begin in early 2008, with an opening set for late 2009 or early 2010, said Gary Phillips, a senior project manager for Blueprint 2000. However, when the park opens, it won’t have very many of the amenities that community leaders hope one day will make downtown a real destination.

Some features that currently aren’t funded include a stair entry and 12-foot waterfall visible from Monroe Street; a refurbished electrical building that could be home to a restaurant; a relocated historic Lake Hall School House; a misting fountain; a large plaza with fountains and seats; and an interactive water-play area for kids.

Features that do have funding include four pedestrian bridges that will stretch over the St. Augustine Branch; a fence depicting Tallahassee’s history; an ornamental protective fence; a dog park; and a parking lot. The basic infrastructure of the park also is funded.

The plan calls for the closing of Gaines Street from Meridian to Suwannee streets and the closing of Gadsden Street from Bloxham Street to the CSX railroad crossing. However, Suwannee Street would be extended from Gaines to Gadsden streets.

“This has such style,” said City Commissioner Debbie Lightsey. “It’s going to be beautiful.”

Blueprint 2000 officials are hoping to pay for the rest of the project with a major private fundraising drive and state and federal dollars. Eventually, the park will be part of Capital Cascade Trail, which stretches more than four miles from near Leon High School to Munson Slough at Springhill Road.

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