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When will Courtney get her Sand Castle? It's in the final design stage, but more fundraising is needed.

FRED SWEGLES, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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A view of the kid-sized castle

Courtney Faye Smith, 9, gets a first look at playground plans that could become a real-life fantasy, Courtney's Sand Castle.

By **FRED SWEGLES**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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SAN CLEMENTE — Courtney Faye Smith got her first peek this week at a plan on paper that could become a real kid-sized castle.

"Very, very, very cool!" the 9-year-old San Clemente girl with spinal muscular atrophy said after viewing Richard Fisher's design for a universally accessible playground to be known as Courtney's Sand Castle.

SunCal Companies – developer of the 313-home Marblehead Coastal community – plans to build an 8½-acre park that will include two playgrounds – a conventional one and Courtney's Sand Castle. SunCal plans to contribute \$600,000 to Courtney's Sand Castle through a Community Facilities District. But officials expect the playground to cost around \$1 million, so Fisher said fundraising is needed.

Courtney Faye appeared at this week's meeting of the San Clemente Junior Woman's Club with her pal Spencer Shelton, 11, to see the plan and hear about fundraising efforts. Spencer shared her enthusiasm for the plan, riding on the back of Courtney Faye's electric-powered wheelchair, doing 360s as they left the meeting.

It was their friendship, about five years ago, that inspired Spencer's mother, Lori, and Christina Smith to campaign to build a playground designed to appeal equally to children with special needs as to other kids.

"These two kids were wanting to play together – one with no disabilities, one with," Shelton said. "This park is for children of all abilities."

Courtney Faye was 4 when the search began in south Orange County for a suitable site. San Clemente agreed to create Courtney's Sand Castle as part of Richard T. Steed Memorial Park, but that project got hung up in debate over a Big League Dreams softball stadium plan. So in 2003 the city decided to make Courtney's Sand Castle part of a proposed soccer park in the 248-acre Marblehead Coastal development.

Marblehead Coastal developer Jim Johnson offered to fund a then-\$400,000 Courtney's Sand Castle if it moved there. City officials hoped it

could be built sooner in the Marblehead Coastal development, which then was working to finalize a California Coastal Commission permit.

Johnson's project got hung up in Coastal Commission delays, however. After his death, the development was sold to SunCal.

Now, five years after Lori Shelton approached San Juan Capistrano with the playground concept, grading is well under way at SunCal's Marblehead Coastal site, and project manager Mike McGovern said work could begin in February on the 8½-acre park. But costs have gone over budget.

Fisher, the playground's designer, appeared before the Junior Woman's Club as part of a broader appeal to the community for help.

"We are very anxious to share the concept of this with as many people as we can," he said, "so we can get some fundraising under way to enhance the funding we already have."

Asked to name her favorite feature in the playground, Courtney Faye announced, "The big water thingee – like, the big water wall and the sphere. They're gong to be so fun!"

The playground, consisting of a simulated castle and simulated sailing ship, would include a 12-foot-long wall "where the children can go up and touch it and the water will run down their arms," Fisher said. Varied textures along the wall would give the cascading water a variety of sounds. Also planned is a globe from which water would ooze, offering a different sensory experience.

Christina Smith, Courtney Faye's mother, said there's a reason why the water feature is so important, going back to a day, years ago, when Courtney Faye saw other kids playing in sprinklers and wanted to join them.

"I told her she simply couldn't," Christina Smith said, "because she'd short out her wheelchair."

The memory of those sprinklers remains, Mom said. "All she wanted to do was be in the water."

Launa Gould, president of the San Clemente Garden Club, attended this week's meeting to see if the club might become involved in The Castle Garden, a sensory garden.

"There will be plants that kids can go up and crush and get nice aromas on their hands," Fisher said. "Back in some of the other areas that they can look at – but not necessarily get back in there to touch – we envision things like very large sunflowers and other plants that might have a recognizable name. We've got lamb's ear ... butterfly bush ... kangaroo paws ... lion's tail, things like that that the kids would really get a kick out of because of their name."

Gould said she will approach the Garden Club, which has helped the city with numerous other gardens on public property around town.

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