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Courtney Faye Smith, namesake for Courtney's Sand Castle. The SC resident has spinal muscular atrophy.

FRED SWEGLES, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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## Castle takes shape for Marblehead Coastal sports park

Dubbed Courtney's Sand Castle, the park's designed to be Orange County's first universally accessible playground.

By **FRED SWEGLES**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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**SAN CLEMENTE** — Dick Fisher thinks families will travel to San Clemente from far and wide so their kids can frolic in Courtney's Sand Castle, which he expects to become Orange County's first universally accessible playground.

It will include a castle-like play apparatus with a simulated moat, drawbridge and series of ramps, geared to children 5 to 12 years old. A second play apparatus will resemble a ship, this one geared to younger kids.

What is special is that both of these will be as friendly to kids in wheelchairs as to other kids, who can play alongside. There will be a swing set – two conventional swings and two that a child in a wheelchair can be strapped into – minus the wheelchair – to go for a ride.

And there will be sensory attractions that will highlight the sense of smell and sound and interaction with water, designed to delight every kid but perhaps be appreciated even more by those who can't see well, or at all.

Fisher, chief designer of Courtney's Sand Castle, has completed the conceptual plan and is refining it into construction drawings. He presented the plan this month to city parks commissioners, who were delighted.

"This is an incredible project," Commissioner Jeff McConnell said. "I think as a community we can be very proud."

San Clemente officials are hoping to see Courtney's Sand Castle built in 2007 as part of an 8-acre soccer park in the Marblehead Coastal community, next to Shorecliffs Middle School. SunCal Companies, developer of the 313-home Marblehead Coastal community, will build the

park, which will include three soccer fields, a lighted basketball court, a restroom, picnic facilities and an additional playground geared more to middle school kids. The park also will have a 200-space parking lot, a joint effort of the city and the Capistrano Unified School District, to provide enhanced access to Shorecliffs Middle School from the Marblehead side.

"They're hoping to start shortly after the first of the year," Fisher said. But that doesn't mean Courtney's Sand Castle will coincide with the rest of the park. Because it is a special playground, it has its own budget, and at present Fisher said the playground appears to be over budget.

The \$600,000 budget for Courtney's Sand Castle will come from SunCal, if the City Council approves Community Facilities District funding, City Treasurer Pall Gudgeirsson said. That will be up for discussion at the council's Nov. 21 meeting.

Fisher said the special features of the universally accessible playground are expensive, and in an escalating construction market the project could run as high as \$1 million.

"We're all going to have to put on our thinking caps as to how we might continue with fundraising activities," he said.

Local residents and the San Clemente Junior Woman's Club can make up part of that gap. They have held fundraisers over the last four years to try to turn into reality the idea of a playground that tries harder to please. There was a golf tournament, a pasta-night fundraiser, grant applications and a corporate donation from an association of Boeing employees.

Melissa Echelberger, a former Junior Woman's Club president who has been the club's liaison to the city on Courtney's Sand Castle, said she believes nearly \$100,000 may be available from donations and grants. There was one grant, she said, that was diverted to another city project when Coastal Commission delays in the Marblehead Coastal development risked making the grant expire.

The Juniors will discuss Courtney's Sand Castle at their next meeting Nov. 13, Echelberger said. There has been talk of a tile-wall fundraiser.

Echelberger has viewed the conceptual plan and is impressed.

"I'm really proud that San Clemente is going to be on the forefront," she said. "These children have been marginalized in our society for so long. I'm really fortunate to have three healthy, vital children. But through working on this project, I have become so much more aware of families that don't, and what that means to them."

The playground is named for Courtney Faye Smith, a 9-year-old San Clemente girl with spinal muscular atrophy.

"Awesome," she said in a prior interview about Courtney's Sand Castle. "I've never really had a park I can go to and play on swings and stuff."

At least not easily. There is a model for Courtney's Sand Castle – a "boundless" playground in Los Angeles' Griffith Park, known as Shane's Inspiration.

"How far would you drive?" Echelberger asked. "I know that Courtney's family was driving to Griffith Park."

To learn more about Courtney's Sand Castle, call Echelberger at 370-4627.

#### **COURTNEY'S SAND CASTLE**

- A simulated castle, about 60 feet square, with gently sloping ramps leading to play stations, geared to ages 5-12.
- A simulated ship, for younger kids, with a stern wheel and talking tubes from the upper deck to the ground, slides and other features.
- A bowl that a child can approach in a wheelchair or on foot to interact with water and sand, and make mud pies.
- A green concrete sea serpent for kids to climb on.
- A shade shelter, shaped like the sails of a ship, with picnic tables.
- Ten benches that look like boulders, with insets.
- A three-dimensional sand-sculpture monument at the playground's

entrance.

- A site for a decorative tile wall – possibly to be designed by children, with three-dimensional lower tiles so kids with limited sight can approach and feel them, maybe even discover a message in Braille.
- Four swings – two conventional, two with special straps for kids removed from wheelchairs.
- A grassy area for relaxation.
- A sensory garden with aromatic plants.
- A musical panel, producing a strum, a chime and other sounds.
- A globe with water bubbling gently over the edge so kids can interact with it.
- A 15-foot-long water wall, heavily textured so water will spill down the face, creating sound.
- Lots of poured-in-place rubber surfaces, designed to be soft and to simulate a moat or sand ... and yes, some real sand too.

Source: Dick Fisher, designer

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