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Fred Swegles/Sun Post News
DREAMING: Courtney Faye Smith, 10, listens Tuesday as playground designer Dick Fisher describes plans for 'Courtney's Sandcastle.'

FRED SWEGLES, SUN POST NEWS

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City Council: 'Build us a castle'

Courtney's Sandcastle, an animated playground, will be under construction this fall

BY FRED SWEGLES SUN POST NEWS

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Courtney Faye Smith was 4 years old in 2001 when two moms approached several south-county cities to ask if they might build a special playground where Courtney, in her wheelchair, could play alongside her friend Spencer Shelton.

A year later, Courtney's hometown, San Clemente, said yes. The city picked a location for the playground known as Courtney's Sandcastle, then decided a year later on another site. A prolonged Coastal Commission approval process for the Marblehead Coastal development kept the playground waiting.

Today, the plans are in place. Courtney, who has spinal muscular atrophy, is 10 years old. And it looks like the yellow brick road to her castle is nearing its destination.

Tuesday, the City Council approved plans for an all-accessible playground with an animated theme, expected to cost about \$1.3 million. The council authorized SunCal, developer of the 313-home Marblehead Coastal community, to erect Courtney's Sandcastle in an 8.5-acre park that SunCal will begin building for the public this fall.

SunCal will contribute \$600,000 for phase 1 and will build it, planning to open it by the fall of 2008.

SunCal is providing the land and has donated the services of a professional grant writer who is working with the Junior Woman's Club and San Clemente Beaches, Parks and Recreation Foundation on fundraising for phase 2, a SunCal spokesman said.

"It's a wonderful community project," Councilwoman Lori Donchak said.

The plan calls for two play structures – one, for ages 6-12, taking the form of a castle with a drawbridge and moat. The other, for ages 5 and under, will be in the form of a ship surrounded by an ocean, serpents and sand. The colored surfaces will be rubberized. The swings will have standard seats and special ones for those who arrive in wheelchairs.

In a sensory garden, plants will emit aromas when touched. There will be plants sheared into the shape of animals, a sand-digging area, interactive musical panels, wind chimes, a water sphere and a rock mountain that

comes to life with sensor-activated water features and a dragon that breathes mist.

"We're asking that SunCal have the contractors price out the entire project so we can get some verifications of what our ultimate financial challenge is, even though we only have money identified at this point for the first phase," designer Dick Fisher said.

The rock mountain is to be built by the same company that built Bear Mountain for Disney's California Adventure, Fisher said.

City Council members said they hope to find a way to get as many features as possible up-front. "I'm just hoping that we can get the water feature as well as the phase 1 things," Donchak said.

WANT TO HELP?

To learn more about the Courtney's Sandcastle fund drive, call the city parks foundation at 949-276-8866.

Contact the writer: fswegles@ocregister.com or 949-492-5127

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