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**FUN FOR ALL:** The universally accessible Courtney's Sand Castle is proposed for a park in the Marblehead Coastal community.

RENDERING: RICHARD FISHER ASSOCIATES

Tuesday, November 14, 2006

## County's first universally accessible playground planned

Courtney's Sand Castle in San Clemente will be as friendly to kids in wheelchairs as to others, who can play alongside.

By **FRED SWEGLES**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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**SAN CLEMENTE** – Dick Fisher thinks families will travel here 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 castlelike play apparatus, with a simulated moat, drawbridge and series of ramps, geared to children 5 to 12. A second play apparatus will resemble a ship, more appropriate for younger kids.

What is special is that both of these will be as friendly to kids in wheelchairs as to others, who can play alongside. There will be a swing set – two conventional swings and two to accommodate disabled children.

And there will be attractions to 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. City parks commissioners were delighted when they got their first look this month.

"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 Cos., 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 \$600,000 budget for Courtney's Sand Castle will come from SunCal, if the City Council approves 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 escalating construction costs could make the project as much 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.

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

"Awesome," she said in an earlier 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.

To learn more about Courtney's Sand Castle, call 949-370-4627.

Contact the writer: 949-492-5127 or [fswegles@ocregister.com](mailto:fswegles@ocregister.com)

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