

This is a printer-friendly version. The navigation and other unnecessary elements have been removed.



Courtney Faye Smith with friend Spencer Shelton-Jenks at a park site in San Clemente where Courtney's Sandcastle has been planned.

PAUL BERSEBACH, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

[MORE PHOTOS](#)

Thursday, November 13, 2008

Girl's handicapped-access playground stalls with home development

Courtney Smith, now 11, waits as stalled Marblehead development spurs San Clemente to look at other options.

By **FRED SWEGLES**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Comments [1](#) | Recommend [0](#)

Courtney Faye Smith was 4 in 2001, when adults in her life began searching for someplace in south Orange County to build Courtney's Sandcastle.

It was to be the area's first universally accessible playground – as much fun for Courtney in her wheelchair as for her best friend, Spencer Shelton-Jenks, playing alongside her without disabilities. It needed a site. It needed fundraising.

Today, Courtney is the new sixth-grade president at Bernice Ayer Middle School. Courtney's Sandcastle is nowhere to be seen, except on a set of construction-ready plans and some pretty drawings.

The location for Courtney's Sandcastle, an 8-acre park site in the stalled Marblehead Coastal development, sits idle. Some San Clemente residents led by Councilwoman Lori Donchak, Spencer's mother, Lori Shelton, and Courtney's mother, Christina Smith, are not content to sit.

"I really believe we can do this for a little girl we made a promise to," Donchak said. On Monday, the city parks commission formed a committee to try to find some way to get the \$1.2 million playground built.

It might not be at the current site, seen as the best in town because of easy access next to the Avenida Vista Hermosa freeway interchange. With no Marblehead Coastal revival in sight, local officials will look at putting the playground in some other park – one that has a restroom, or else the price tag jumps. Universal access doesn't work without a restroom.

Some ask whether lean times dictate doing something less ambitious than architect Richard Fisher's enchanting design with a castle, a ship, water features and a Disney-esque sensor-activated dragon mountain. Or maybe build it in pieces, one at a time. Or do just part of it, latching onto an existing playground.

"It may be a little too much at this point," Commissioner Tom Wicks said.

Donchak isn't deterred. Times are tough in philanthropy, but she has a pile of grant ideas and may ask the city to sell some surplus lots it owns around town: "One hundred here, 100 there, you're talking real money."

Courtney visited the Sandcastle site a few days ago. Great location, but she's open to other sites. "I don't care as long as it gets built," she said.

She has spinal muscular atrophy, a powered wheelchair and a service dog named Michaela. She has a birthday coming up Dec. 31, her 12th. She still has hope of someday seeing Courtney's Sandcastle, even if it has been "a very, very long while."

"I'd like to see the park built before Courtney enters college," Lori Shelton said. "Seven years working on it ... who would have ever guessed we would have gotten this far and then this would happen?"

One encouraging thing, said project planner Tim Shaw, is that the sagging economy has brought down construction prices. "We're seeing bids that are 20 to 30 percent lower than the estimates," he said. "Contractors are really scrambling for work right now."

On a mammoth project like a 42-acre Avenida Vista Hermosa sports park estimated to cost \$33 million, 20 percent to 30 percent savings could free up money for something like Courtney's Sandcastle, even in its full fairy-tale form. The city is preparing to go to bid on that park.

WHAT'S NEXT

With no set timetable, Donchak said she will work with the committee of Bill Thomas, Bob Maltinsky and Leslie Loy to take recommendations to one of the parks commission's next monthly meetings.

Ideas? Call 949-361-8237.

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

ADVERTISEMENT

WHAT'S YOUR CREDIT SCORE?
650 740 820
GET YOUR CREDIT SCORE!
 Experian
 ©2007 ConsumerInfo.com, Inc.

Reader Comments

Comments are encouraged, but you must follow our [User Agreement](#).

- 1. Keep it civil and stay on topic.
- 2. No profanity, vulgarity, racial slurs or personal attacks.
- 3. People who harass others or joke about tragedies will be blocked.

[Oldest First](#) | [Newest First](#) | [Show Recommended Comments Only](#)

1

POWERED BY Pluck

You must be logged in to contribute. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit