

# Proposed "Champions Park" faces opposition



Still in the conceptual phase, the above map depicts the approximate location and design proposed for the "Champions Park" travel team baseball facility, led by Wally Pontiff, Sr. and currently under consideration by the Paquemines Parish Council. It is not to scale.

The idea is a fairly easy sell: bring "Champion's Park," a world class travel team youth baseball facility to Plaquemines Parish, and with it jobs, an increase in tax revenue, and tourists.

But the proposed location, within the acreage known as the Woodlands Conservancy, is a proving a tougher sell.

"From our standpoint it should be somewhere else," said Woodlands Conservancy executive director Katie Brasted. "It's just the wrong location." Over the past two weeks, Brasted has mounted a campaign in opposition to the project.

In investor Wally Pontiff, Sr.'s eyes, the project would be an economic boon for the parish and a "tremendous asset to the community."

The land is owned by the parish, and the Conservancy has managed trails on the approximately 600-acre property under a series of ordinances and a Cooperative Endeavor Agreement (CEA), but doesn't have any jurisdiction over the property. The most recent CEA

between the parish and the Conservancy was signed in 2012, but appears to have expired in 2014.

Led by Pontiff, Champions Park LLC, the private company and planned named for the park, has been pitching their proposal to Plaquemines over the past couple years.

"We were told this land is available," said Pontiff.

Pontiff's vision is to bring the best travel baseball teams (12 and under) from across the country to a state of the art complex consisting of 20 baseball diamonds and 10 to 15 bunk houses, clustered among green space and a lake.

For Pontiff, it's location, location, location. And the biggest asset is the Woodland Highway bridge

at the end of Gen. DeGaulle – which not only gives visitors a sweeping bird's eye view of the park upon arrival, but also provides direct and quick access to downtown New Orleans.

For the families traveling with the teams, New Orleans is the draw, noted District 2 Council Member

## TAKE THE SURVEY

**A developer wants to lease property from Plaquemines Parish to construct Champions Park LLC, a state of the art complex consisting of about 20 baseball diamonds, clustered among green space and a lake as a destination for competition travel baseball for kids 12 and under, similar to the world re-known Dreams Park in Cooperstown, New York.**

**The property is part of hundreds of acres owned by the parish on F. Edward Hebert Blvd. In the vicinity of Woodlands Conservancy, a non-profit working to protect the hardwood forest. The Conservancy is objecting to the development of Champions Park anywhere on the tract and they say it should look elsewhere. The issue has the Plaquemines Parish Council divided.**

**Should the Plaquemines Parish Council support Champions Park?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

***You can offer your opinion by going to [www.plaqueminesgazette.com](http://www.plaqueminesgazette.com) and clicking on the baseball image. Results will be published in next week's edition of The Plaquemines Gazette.***





# BALL PARK

CONTINUED FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Beau Black. The parents can stay, eat, and play in the city, just a short hop away. Black also noted that the location would not add to traffic congestion in Belle Chasse.

"I want to preserve as much of the wetlands as economically and feasibly possible," Black said, but added that it is his job to balance preservation with economic benefit to the people of the parish. Black said that the project was estimated to create at least 30 full time jobs and 150 part-time jobs, which could be filled by local youth in the summer.

Pontiff estimated a potential "\$10 to \$40 million impact over the first few years," some of which would go to Orleans. Black said Pontiff has pledged ongoing financial support for the Plaquemines recreation department as part of the agreement.

But for Brasted, developing the land would go against everything she has spent the past 14 years working toward as the paid executive of the nonprofit.

In 2002, the Plaquemines Parish Council passed an ordinance "supporting the Woodlands initiative and granting non-exclusive, limited servitude on an 80 foot tract on parish-owned property located adjacent to F. Edward Hebert Blvd. to be used for public recreational and educational purposes."

In May of 2005, the Conservancy opened about six miles of walking, jogging, and equestrian trails around the area, with a stated mission and vision to "preserve and develop an ecosystem

dedicated to creating daily public opportunities for recreation, ecotourism and education in a natural and historic setting. The vision of Woodlands Conservancy is to be the regional model for the conservation of hardwood forests, and a leader in the advocacy and preservation of Louisiana's coastal forest ecosystems."

The Conservancy also owns 190 acres in Lower Coast Algiers, called the Delacroix Preserve.

The Plaquemines Parish Council passed two resolutions in support of the negotiation and planning process, one in May in 2014 and another at their May 28 meeting.

The initial discussions explored the parish selling about 250 acres to Champions Park, Black said. However early negotiations also required the parish to invest significantly in the new infrastructure. Now Black said the plan is to lease the 250 acres to the company, which will be entirely responsible for the estimated \$22 million investment to construct the facilities.

While it is unlikely that Champions Park would use all 250 acres, the proposal's exact acreage and location has not yet been given to the council. Pontiff said that Champions Park plans to present the official terms, along with documentation verifying funding, to the council by the end of July.

The mitigation costs related to damaging wetlands could be significant. It is unclear at this time whether all, or what percentage, of the land being sought for development falls under the technical delineation of "wetlands," that would then

be subject to regulations under the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Black said that relocating the proposed recreation center may be an option, thus moving Champions Park further away from the Conservancy trails and partially onto land that has already been cleared.

"This is about the greenest venture you can go into," Black said, noting that the complex would consist largely of green space and a limited number of buildings. Putting parish-owned land into commerce isn't something new, Black noted, "but we want to do it responsibly." He said doesn't want to bring harm to the environment, but that he also has to consider the added jobs and tax revenue, especially as crude oil prices remain low.

But Brasted doesn't see any way to compromise, and said she feels an obligation to the private, public, and corporate donors who have supported the Conservancy over the years. "What kind of message does that send to those people if you are just going to clear it and turn it into something else?" she asked.

Council Chairman Benny Rousselle brought up the same point to the Plaquemines Economic Development and Tourism Commission.

"My opposition is the location," Rousselle also told the commission. "I'm not against the project, I'm against the location." He mentioned Walker Rd. as a potential alternative location. Rousselle also expressed concern that if the park spurs additional development, even more of the Woodlands could be at risk.

However Pontiff said that he won't consider other locations in Plaquemines. Black

said that he has no problem with other location, but that the investors approached the parish – and this is the area they want. There is a "serious risk of losing the project," Black said.

"Why not find an area already cleared?" Brasted questioned. "In a parish that talks about wetland loss all the time, why would we voluntarily allow 250 acres to be destroyed? That doesn't send a good message to the community or to the world."

The land also acts as a crucial habitat for migratory birds, and as a wind barrier for New Orleans and nearby communities, she said, and expressed concerns about changing the hydrology. Brasted questions the plan from a business standpoint as well – regarding the need to bring in massive amounts of fill dirt, and mitigate for the destruction of wetlands.

Black and Pontiff see the plan as something that could actually benefit the Conservancy.

For Pontiff, it's a win-win. He argues that Champions Park would bring many more visitors to the trails, and that the trails would only be minimally impacted.

Black is offering a benefit that he believes could legally protect the rest of the land far into the future.

"I told the Conservancy board that I would be the first one to draft a CEA with a long-term lease for you," he said.

Pontiff said his ideal outcome would be to open the park in 2017. Black said he doesn't want to rush the decision, and that Champions Park still needs to do their "due diligence" and bring the required documents and permitting before the council.