



News

What Will Happen to Fair Park?

After a year of turmoil, Dallas Park and Recreation laid out their vision for managing Fair Park to a City Council committee—but no one could (or would) discuss a vital part of that plan.

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Last week, Dallas Parks and Recreation laid out its public-private partnership management model for Fair Park to City Council members on the Parks, Trails, and Environment Committee, just as the city begins a new generation of management for its “crown jewel.”

The city plans to manage the park while delegating some functions, such as security, food, and venue advertising, to private companies. “We have the right infrastructure there, it’s just that, I truly believe, we have not given the necessary time and attention that Fair Park deserves, and that’s why the old

models don't work," Dallas Park and Recreation Director John Jenkins told the committee. "It has to be a partnership between the private sector, the city, and the surrounding community."

The city took over management of the park this September after cutting ties with the previous sub-contractor, Oak View Group (formerly known as Spectra), and the nonprofit intermediary Fair Park First. That relationship crumbled after it was revealed that OVG allegedly misappropriated \$5.7 million in donations. The city also had no direct contract with OVG, which further complicated oversight. (OVG still manages another city asset: the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center.)

Before the park's privatization in 2018, it was run by the city. Many at the time felt it was underutilizing the space and doing so at too high a cost. The new public-private model aims to take a hybrid approach, reaping the benefits of both models while mitigating as many of the negatives as possible.

Park officials laid out five pillars for how they're going to approach Fair Park. They include finding ways to better utilize the successful partners at the park they already have, developing regularly occurring community events and programming that also include opportunities for small businesses near Fair Park, and encouraging nonprofits to use the park and facilities in the hopes that they become operating partners over time. Officials also said they hope to "aggressively" pursue additional large events and other opportunities for the park.

That all amounts to a lot of 'economic development,' which is city-speak for investing heavily to attract businesses. Park and Recreation Deputy Director Ryan O' Connor told the committee he hopes to have contracts with the City of Dallas Economic Development Corporation ready by early 2026.

Neighborhood Spotlight



South Dallas - Fair Park

The first thing you need to understand is that the neighborhood's name, South Dallas, is a misnomer. It sits predominantly east, rather than south, of downtown. The second thing to understand is that, despite the disrepair into which much of this historic corner of the city fell in recent decades, there are residents here passionately committed to forging a strong sense of community.

"This economic development arm has to be the driver [...]" Jenkins said.

"That is our key component, and we have never looked at it that way at Fair Park."

What did city council members say?

At the top of most council members' concerns was the briefing itself. The agenda had been structured so that the committee members couldn't ask how the promised Community Park—a green space that would replace parking spaces in Fair Park—would be built and managed, since it was initially the responsibility of Fair Park First.

"I'm tired of the way things are being put on an agenda that gags us," Bazaldua said. "We've got major business in the city that we need to discuss, and I don't like it being parceled and siloed out for us to not actually get to the elephant in the room."

Fair Park First secured a \$3 million donation for the Community Park just this June and has raised more than \$30 million in total, leaving them just \$6 million shy of their fundraising goal. But that funding is in limbo now that the city has formally ended its contract with Fair Park First after the fallout with OVG. City officials have pointed out that the cash is tied to Fair Park First, and that not working with them would mean securing a deal with another nonprofit to restart the fundraising process.

However, some on the Park and Recreation board (a group of residents appointed to oversee the city's portfolio of parks and recreation facilities) have voiced a desire to remain cautious, taking a wait-and-see approach. They'd like to review a full audit of the nonprofit's spending and funding before jumping into another contract with the nonprofit.

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While the Community Park was not mentioned in the presentation, Jenkins said it plays a vital role in the revitalization of Fair Park. The conversation around the Community Park is especially sensitive given it's seen as an effort to undo some of the damage caused when homes owned by the Black community in South Dallas were razed and removed with eminent domain to expand Fair Park in the 1960s. Councilmember Paul Ridley also echoed support for the Community Park.

"I was surprised that it was not included—not even mentioned—in this presentation, because it not only is something that the community wants, it's something that would constitute an investment in attracting economic development in that vicinity," he said.

As for the actual presentation from Parks and Rec executives, committee members were hungry for more specifics. “This presentation is what you want to do – can you tell us what you’re doing now to fulfill any of the opportunities and promises you’ve already provided?” Councilmember Lorie Blair said. O’Connor told the committee a “very detailed plan and timeline” would be ready “probably early second quarter of next year.”

What happens next for Fair Park?

Park and Rec will focus on what they call “low-hanging fruit.” This includes throwing more festivals at Fair Park (Ridley suggested a Christmas event), hosting family-friendly events at the Leonhardt Lagoon Nature Walk, and focusing on forming a committee to manage the Cotton Bowl. Officials also said they are currently securing short-term contracts for security on the park premises and reviewing older contracts. They’ll then begin looking at longer-term contracts that will hand over venue advertising to private partners.

Bazaldua requested that future conversations include the full council and the city manager. “I don’t ever want to have a Fair Park presentation that doesn’t include the city manager to talk about how any of the plans you’re bringing forward is going to also include work from their office to get it done,” he said. “We’ve got to stop the siloed approach, or any of these plans are not going to be successful.”

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Fair Park



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