

Riverfront project's \$150M price tag isn't its biggest concern

'Suns' project could cost over \$10M a year to operate and maintain.



A rendering of a proposed pedestrian bridge and park-over-the-river connecting the existing Sunrise MetroPark and the proposed Sunset park.

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People fish along the banks of the Great Miami River, near the confluence of Wolf Creek. The Dayton Riverfront Plan includes a plan for the Suns project, which is a \$150 million investment that would create a new pedestrian bridge, a new park and many new amenities along the riverbanks.

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A photo of the proposed Sunset Park today and a rendering showing what the vision is for the park.

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BY CORNELIUS FROLIK - STAFF WRITER

ONLY IN THE DAYTON DAILY NEWS

An ambitious proposal to create a breathtaking new pedestrian bridge and park and to redevelop a sizable section of downtown Dayton's riverfront could cost \$150 million – but officials say that's not even the project's main financial obstacle.

Raising money for the project's capital costs certainly could be a challenge, but supporters of the Dayton Riverfront Plan say a big question is how to secure funding to pay for new annual operation and maintenance expenses, estimated to be around \$10.5 million per year.

“Securing operational costs is often more challenging than capital costs because, while capital costs are a one-time commitment, operational costs are ongoing and thus are required every year for the life of the project,” said Carrie Scarff, chief of planning and projects with Five Rivers MetroParks, one of the Dayton Riverfront Plan partners.

The Montgomery County Land Bank provided grant funding that was used to hire HR&A Advisors to develop an operations and maintenance cost estimate and an operating revenue plan for what is being called the “Suns” project.

The proposed Suns project, which is part of the Dayton Riverfront Plan, has multiple parts, including the construction of a new \$37 million “Unity Bridge” over the Great Miami River; the creation of a \$28 million new “Sunset Park;” and the upgrading of the existing Sunrise MetroPark (\$28 million).

The proposal also calls for about \$26 million in road and bridge improvements; \$20 million in river beach improvements at the confluence of the Great Miami River and Wolf Creek and \$8 million in improvements to McIntosh Park.

The Suns will assemble parks and open space along the Great Miami River in West Dayton into a vibrant continuation of Dayton’s riverfront that began at RiverScape MetroPark, Scarff said.

“The Suns will transform the river from the city’s historical racial divide to the place where our community comes together, symbolized by the Unity Bridge,” Scarff said.

Enthusiasm for the Dayton Riverfront Plan soared after conceptual renderings were released of the proposed Unity Bridge, Sunset Park and potential improvements to Sunrise Park and the riverbanks.

The renderings show a dazzling, futuristic-looking pedestrian bridge over the Great Miami River with green spaces, trees, lawns, benches and other amenities.

The structure, which would link Sunrise park and the proposed Sunset park on opposite sides of the river, has a design that rivals some of the most revered and awe-inspiring pedestrian crossings around the country.

Riverfront plan supporters say the goal is to make the Suns parks as nice and eye-catching as RiverScape MetroPark.

“Braided pathways up and down the levees will erase the separation between the city grid and the riverfront,” says a posting on the Dayton Riverfront Plan website.

“Plazas at each of the parks will align across the river with the equinox, further connecting our urban environment to our natural environment.”

The capital cost of the Suns project is estimated to be around \$150 million.

While some smaller elements of the project have been funded, most of the capital costs would need to be raised from federal, state and local government sources, grants, private contributions and philanthropic support, Scarff said.

This construction price tag is actually less than what it cost – adjusted for inflation – to build RiverScape MetroPark, Day Air Ballpark where the Dayton Dragons play and the Schuster Center around the turn of the century, Scarff said.

But the capital costs are just a one-time ask.

HR&A Advisors said it could cost about \$10.5 million annually to pay for maintenance, horticulture, programming, administration, overhead, and long-term repair and replacement needs at the Suns properties.

RiverScape MetroPark, which spans about six acres, costs about \$1.5 million to maintain each year. The Suns would be much larger, spread over about 42 acres.

HR&A Advisors identified a variety of potential revenue sources to pay for ongoing operating costs, like sponsorships, rental and event fees and general fund contributions from the city of Dayton and Montgomery County.

But the consultant believed these might pay only a fraction of operating costs and the best option might be new taxes or assessments, such as a new levy or a sales tax hike.

Officials said that Five Rivers MetroParks has not considered a second levy, and Montgomery County has no plans to pursue new taxes at this time. They said the city of Dayton has not discussed using taxes for this purpose.

HR&A Advisors said another option would be to seek a new “sin tax” on sales of alcohol, tobacco and nicotine products, lottery and gambling products or possibly other items, like soda.

But the revenue possibilities the consultant offered are not being considered at this time in part because constructing all phases of the Suns project is not realistic right now, Scarff said.

The riverfront plan partners will look at various phasing options for the project for which the operational and capital costs can be managed, she said.

“The vision for The Suns remains intact,” Scarff said.

“The partners share a longterm commitment to implement the project. ... RiverScape MetroPark took 20 years to complete, and the partners will demonstrate similar perseverance to deliver the Suns to the community.”

Work on RiverScape MetroPark began in 1997 and the final phase of the project, the River Run, was not completed until 20 years later, in 2017.

Some work at the Suns sites is underway or planned, like the addition of a new paved trail from Salem Avenue to Third Street.

Dayton also is upgrading McIntosh Park by opening a new parking lot, adding new playground equipment and the basketball court was renovated, said Todd Kinskey, Dayton’s director of planning, neighborhoods and development.

The Suns parks would be a regional destination, Kinskey said, and he hopes they would have a positive impact on downtown properties and buildings near the riverbanks that currently do not see the river as an asset.

“If that was built, and that existed, it would attract people,” he said.

More than 9,000 people live within a quarter mile of the parks.

Mike Grauwelman, executive director of the Montgomery County Land Bank, said he thinks the Suns would be a magnet for activity that increases interest in nearby neighborhoods.

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