

Proposed mega-park in Horizon West could be Orange County's version of Central Park



By **STEPHEN HUDAK**
ORLANDO SENTINEL | FEB 22, 2019



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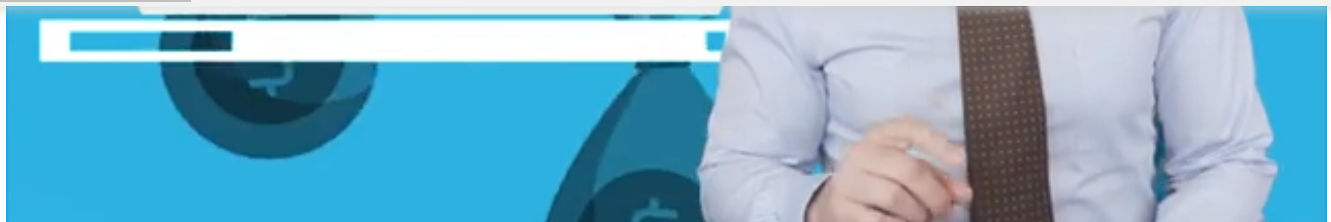
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Orange County is considering a mega-park in Horizon West, the fast-growing community near

Orange County is considering a mega-park in Horizon West, the fast-growing community near Walt Disney World, that could feature an outdoor amphitheater for major concerts, botanical gardens and an aquatics center.

“Think of it like New York’s Central Park Orange County-style,” said Orange County Commissioner Betsy VanderLey, whose district spans the county’s booming southwestern sector, including the villages that make up Horizon West.

VanderLey discussed ideas for the 220-acre parcel earlier this month in a public meeting with Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings, who described the property as having potential to be “one of our crown jewels.”

The commissioner’s ambitious ideas are the latest concepts proposed for the park property, part of which is used in the cooperative water-reuse project known as [**Conserv II**](#), which helps recharge Florida’s primary drinking water source, the Floridan aquifer.



Orange County Commissioner Betsy Vanderley envisions a mega-park in Horizon West with a music venue on par with the MidFlorida Credit Union Amphitheatre, adjacent to I-4, east of Tampa, which has a summer schedule featuring the Dave Matthews Band and Hootie & The Blowfish. (Orlando Sentinel file)

The county first sketched out a plan in 2003 for a Horizon West Regional Park to be a “Sportsplex Park” filled with athletic fields for youth tournaments.

Interest in a sportsplex waned as other sports complexes have sprouted in the region, reducing demand for athletic fields.

A later park concept envisioned not only youth athletic fields but a dog park, an “adventure park” play area and sheltered pavilions.

Matt Suedmeyer, manager of Orange County Parks and Recreation, said the property is 11 times the size of most other regional parks and close to a freeway network, which includes State Road 429 on its western edge.

Those assets make something special possible, VanderLey said.



Betsy VanderLey, Orange County Commission District 1 (Stephen Hudak / Orlando Sentinel)

She envisioned a lakeside music venue on par with the Tampa-area MidFlorida Credit Union Amphitheatre, which has a summer schedule featuring the Dave Matthews Band and Hootie & The Blowfish.

The ideas intrigue Jeff Loeffert, 39, a trustee with Horizon West Alliance, a nonprofit group that promotes smart development and civic pride in the community.

“It’s a big, big, deal for all of us out here,” he said of the park, roughly a third the size of Central Park in New York City.

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When Horizon West is built out, it will boast more than 100,000 residents — and the park has to be more than ball fields.

“This space is so unique and so special...you have to think broader,” said Loeffert, who has lived in the neighborhood of Summerport for six years.

He envisions a setting which embraces nature, technology and the arts.

“Why can’t we have an amphitheater out here...Why can’t we have a nice, nice wedding venue? Why couldn’t we have an aquatics center? Let’s have a botanical garden.”

VanderLey said the federal government recently relinquished property rights it held for providing financial aid for Conserv II, which cost \$200 million when it was built on the property 19 years ago.

She said the latest concept for the park stands a better chance to be fulfilled because of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s quit-claim on property rights.

“It doesn’t have to go up and pass through the federal government,” VanderLey said.

The park also will have to serve residents of Horizon West, an area with a population estimated at more than 25,000 by the American Community Survey, a five-year population estimate prepared for the Census Bureau.

Over the past two years, Horizon West has accounted for two of every three building permits issued by Orange County’s Division of Building Safety.

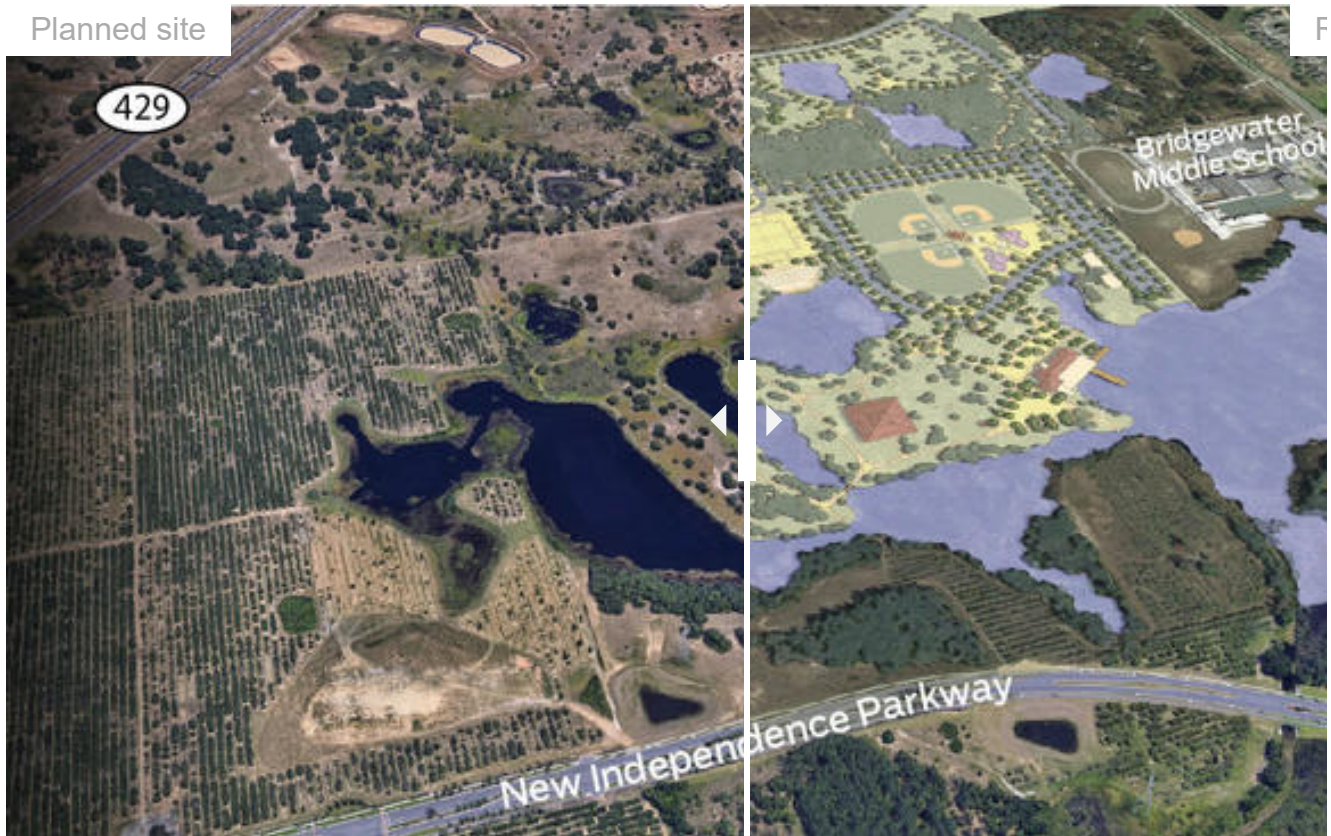


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The park property, adjacent to Bridgewater Middle School, stretches from State Road 429 to Tiny Road.

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Bridgewater, which opened in 2007 to provide relief for then-crowded Lakeview Middle School, is the most jam-packed of the Orange County school district's 196 traditional schools with 1,600 more students than the campus was built to accommodate.

During the meeting with VanderLey, which was advertised and recorded as required by Florida's open-meetings law, the mayor said the park's size and proposed scope could turn the venue into an attraction for residents and visitors.

Neither Demings nor VanderLey estimated the cost of the proposed park, but both acknowledged in the discussion that developing the venue into a top regional attraction would require both public money and corporate backing.

They discussed negotiating partnerships with deep-pocket sponsors, including Disney.

“If we do it on taxpayer dollars alone, I don’t think it can be fully realized,” VanderLey said.

But partnerships can “supercharge” the project, she said.

VanderLey said every world-class community has a cornerstone park, and the Horizon West park can be Orange County’s.

None of Orange County’s 100-plus parks or trails boast all the amenities proposed for the Horizon West property.

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VanderLey said the property has lakes and hills, which she is opposed to flattening for ballfields.

“I just don’t think it’s the highest and best use of the property,” she said in an interview with the Orlando Sentinel.

The undeveloped property now attracts weekend hikers and horseback riders.

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Stephen Hudak



Stephen Hudak often writes about bears in Central Florida and weird things in the Orlando area, including Orange County government. He likes snow and Ohio State but wound up in the Sunshine State, which has been good to him. He was a Pulitzer finalist for work on the FAMU hazing tragedy.

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