

# The driving force for freeway park

Jody Grant sees project as tying together Dallas' thriving urban core

**J**ody Grant intends to create a world-class park out of thin air.

For the last three years, the 68-year-old chairman of Texas Capital Bank has been a man on a mission, marshaling support, getting city and state approvals and raising funds for a 5-acre, multi-use park on top of Woodall Rodgers Freeway.

Located between Pearl and St. Paul streets where the North Harwood Bridge is now, the park will help unify the disparate



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sectors of development going on in and around our urban core.

"This is going to be the Central Park of Dallas," says Mr. Grant, sitting in his bank office on McKinney Avenue. "We have a concrete ditch that separates Uptown and downtown. We have Victory to the west and the Art District to the east. This will

be the hub that ties it all together. We're creating 5 acres of downtown space out of air rights."

The project, once perceived as pie in the sky, is now considered a reachable reality. The Woodall Rodgers Park Foundation, with Mr. Grant as chairman, has commitments for 85 percent of the money needed to deck the freeway and add earth and turf and build a basic park, which will cost around \$67 million.

And unlike the Trinity River plan, which faces an uncertain future, the Woodall Rodgers Park is moving forward.

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"We're going to build a field of dreams, and then we're going to run it like Disney runs Epcot to get people to come," Mr. Grant says. "There's going to be something going on virtually 18 hours of the day."

Construction, which Mr. Grant hopes to begin in the middle of 2008, is expected to take 40 months. So people could be taking tai chi classes on the great lawn or holding court during happy hour at the cafe by late 2011, he says.

To date, Mr. Grant and two of his cohorts on the foundation board, Linda Owen and John Zogg, have snared \$20 million in city bond money, another \$20 million in federal dollars coming through the Texas Department of Transportation and \$17 million in private donations.

Mr. Grant began the official campaign to raise private money with a kickoff dinner for potential big givers three weeks ago.

## A deadline

As good as all that sounds, there's a hitch: Mr. Grant needs to raise at least \$10 million more over the next 3½ months to get construction started.

The foundation needs to have commitments for the full cost of the deck by Jan. 31 or the city bond money could be shifted to other projects. There's also the use-it-or-lose-it threat whenever federal money is involved.

"Unfortunately, naming rights for concrete and steel doesn't appeal to anyone," says Mr. Grant. "So we need to raise money with no strings attached."

plan by Houston-based James Burnett Landscape Architecture. If Big D is to have its version of New York's Bryant Park or Chicago's Millennium, Mr. Grant says, more like \$43 million short.

The larger-scale vision — which would cost about \$100 million — includes a children's play garden, dog park, cafe, stage and bandshell.

"We don't have time to hold OKs or sell bricks or do things that have a low payback for the energy we put into it," Mr. Grant says. "Our campaign is focused on folks who can afford to write large checks and property owners who benefit directly from the park."

"But we won't turn down anyone."

Mr. Grant and his wife, Sheila, stepped to the plate with a million dollars, and Texas Capital Bank matched that. Ms. Owen, resident of the Real Estate Council, secured \$1.5 million from her organization, while Mr. Zogg, managing director of Crescent Real Estate Equities, garnered \$1 million from his REIT.

## Your help needed

Want to immortalize yourself or someone you love and help your city in the process? Mr. Grant has a deal for you. "We've got a \$20 million price tag on naming a 100 million park."

For lesser amounts, you can sponsor any number of park amenities, such as the water feature at Olive Street, the botanical garden or the children's garden.

The bandshell and stage are taken. Lyn and John Muse have agreed to pay for that.

So what real economic impact will the park have?

More than \$300 million over the next 20 years, Mr. Grant says, making one of those commissioned projects that always seem pretty

ethereal.

But then Mr. Grant gets more specific. "If you have property immediately adjacent to the park, your building should increase in value by 25 percent. If you're within a five-minute walk, the number is 15 percent. If you're within a 10-minute walk, it's 10 percent."

All that means more tax dollars for the city.

Just before the last council ended its term, the project received city approvals for how the park will be developed and how it will be used.

One sticking point was the lack of dedicated parking. "So we're taking park space away to create 122 parking spaces," Mr. Grant says.

Unlike the Trinity River plan, this is a park road project that both Councilwoman Angela Hunt and Mayor Tom Leppert support.

Why?

It pulls in Victory and Uptown into downtown and the Arts District.

"It takes out a barrier and becomes a magnet," says Mr. Leppert says. "In terms of what we're trying to do with downtown, it's a big piece."

Mr. Leppert, who has a construction and real estate background, hasn't studied the numbers being bandied by Mr. Grant but has no reason to doubt them.

"I buy into it," he says. "From a conceptual standpoint, there's no question that the impact will be big."

Ms. Owen figures the fundraising challenge couldn't be in better hands.

"Jody has the sophistication, the acumen and the experience of a world-class, multinational player," she says. "But he has chosen to apply all that talent and all that influence with all those

network connections at a very local level to build community."

Until a few months ago, even the park's key designer, Jim Burnett, worried that he wouldn't get his shot at building this hanging garden 17 feet above a freeway.

But he's seen the response to Mr. Grant's shifting into higher gear, and those doubts have been erased. "These are wonderful citizens determined to see that it gets built," Mr. Burnett says. "The details are going to be amazing and responsive to Dallas' desire to be a forward-thinking city of the 21st century. This won't be a nostalgic park from the turn of the last one."

Oh, and there's one other thing, Mr. Burnett says: "We've promised that the park will be grackle-free."

# Idea is to follow Bryant Park's path

When Dan Biederman took over management of New York's Bryant Park in 1988, the promenade in midtown Manhattan was controlled by drug dealers, muggers and the homeless.

"Bryant Park was a disaster for the real estate people," he says. "They made their buildings open to side streets so people wouldn't have to go into it. Now they're naming their buildings Bryant Park."

On a gorgeous day, it was lucky to draw 700 visitors at peak times, and they didn't linger.

Mr. Biederman redesigned and reopened the 6-acre city park behind the New York Public Library in 1991, and today it routinely draws 4,200 during lunchtime alone. Add sunshine, and the daily audience swells to 20,000.

Now the principal of New York-based Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corp. expects to transplant that success here.

That means creating specific reasons for people to come to the Woodall Rodgers Park and stay. In park management lingo, it's called "programming."

For Dallas, he envisions such amenities as a cafe with a terrace, a children's play garden, a bandshell, a reading room and a dog park. There won't be a skateboard park — there's too much liability.

"The design is driven by the program," says Mr. Biederman, who has parks in Miami; Newark, N.J.; and Atlanta. "Another thing we did before we turned it over to the architect was to cost out the amenities to make sure the park can afford to run them.

"The sequence is program, budget, design and then manage. It has to be great when it opens and even better 10 years later."

Landscape architect Jim Burnett agrees. "I've seen too many parks that are egocentric. They're about the designer. And when you get



Bryant Park

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to the park, you don't know why you're there.

"There's always something to see and do at Bryant Park. That's what we intend for Woodall Rodgers, too."

And yes, the challenge in Dallas is the heat. The park will be shadier than most and with less open lawn, Mr. Biederman says: "We're playing with the idea of misters and water elements where kids can run through and get a little wet."

And of course, it will cool off when the sun goes down.

"We want to make sure this park is jammed between 5 p.m. and 11. Some of that is accom-

modating singles in a social place."

Happy hours at Bryant Park are big draws.

"The marrieds go home to the suburbs at 5 or 5:30. Then it's all singles working in Manhattan going into their second part of their day, their social life," he says. "The numbers after work are half as high as the numbers at lunch, which is phenomenal."

And, he says, the Woodall Rodgers Park will also need Wi-Fi parkwide so that people can work wirelessly. "In New York, we retain hundreds of people who otherwise would abandon us to go back to the office after lunch."

*Cheryl Hall*