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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

College Station City Council discontinues Texas Independence Ballpark project

Alex Miller

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Construction has been halted on a new baseball complex on Rock Prairie Road.

Meredith Seaver

Alex Miller

The fate of the Texas Independence Ballpark was decided Thursday night as College Station city councilors directed city staff to discontinue the project after soil issues arose this spring and required site improvements would cost an additional \$10-\$16 million.

City councilors also directed city staff to look for alternative locations for a ballpark complex, make the current site's completed infrastructure into a community park and return to the council with other options and public ideas on how to repurpose the land.

“From here on, discontinuing it is really the best option,” councilman William Wright said. “Ten to \$16 million dollars is too much money, but I’m excited that we’re actually able to use what we have there and I think it has a good opportunity to build something that perhaps we don’t have that can serve our community well.”

The Texas Independence Project, located in College Station’s Midtown off Rock Prairie Road, was halted in April after soil issues emerged and before additional tests and investigations were asked to be conducted, according to city officials.

The complex, expected to consist of four full-sized diamond fields, was suitable for baseball and softball. The infields were to be synthetic turf with natural grass outfields. There are currently no turf baseball or softball fields for public use in

College Station. This complex was to be owned and operated by the city and available for Little League games and practices and baseball and softball tournaments. Construction of the ballpark complex began last November after the four diamond sport fields were approved to be built by city councilors last October. Construction was expected to take about a year and city officials said they hoped to begin playing games on the field by the start of 2024.

Before city councilors decided to direct city staff to discontinue the project, Jennifer Cain, College Station's director of capital projects, presented a timeline of events and options forward.

The total cost of the project was \$23.1 million with \$6.8 million coming from hotel occupancy tax (HOT) funds, according to city officials. Through Aug. 18, city officials said the budget encumbered is over \$13.3 million with more than \$4.7 million of the budget spent. The construction contract was worth over \$16.6 million and more than \$3.4 million has been spent through Aug. 18. City officials noted no HOT funds have been used yet on the project.

The city purchased the land where the ballpark project is located in January 2002. In August 2017, a preliminary engineering report was conducted and a design contract for the project was approved by councilors in February 2018. A geotechnical report was done in March 2019 and project plans were completed in March 2020.

The geotechnical report showed there was relatively weak soils on the site that were primarily encountered in the top 1-4 feet of the soil, which were attributed to significant rains that were above average, Cain said. The geotechnical report's key assumption was that since it had been really wet, the soils would resolve themselves out.

"That assumption was made and that assumption proved not to be true once they got out there and started working the site," Cain said.

A separate sewer line project was done in 2022 as part of a larger project, and Cain said there were no indication of soil concerns during that project.

The COVID-19 pandemic delayed bidding and plans were updated in spring 2022 before bidding finally began in summer and fall of last year. City officials said heavy rain in January and February led to initial indications of concern in February and March before additional tests and investigations were done in April.

After testbeds were dug up this spring, Cain said three options were presented to city officials: Mix the soil, replace it and compact it in 6-inch lifts; add a lime treatment to the first option to chemically stabilize the soil; or remove the soil, haul it off and replace it. Cain noted the first two options worked on a small scale, but would take a considerable amount of manpower and time to do across the project site.

“Project management is a hard job and stopping a project that we had this much interest and money moving towards is not an easy decision, so I appreciate those hard decisions and bringing them back to us to look at,” councilman Mark Smith said.

Cain said contractors were able to complete a good portion of utility work where the soil is better. Councilors asked Cain if site items already built, such as bathrooms and a concession stand, could still be used in a repurposed project, like a community park. Cain said yes.

Councilwoman Linda Harvell said city staff should look into bringing things not available to the community.

“I don’t believe there’s many trees, I think they were all removed for the fields themselves, but what kind of projects could we have out there that would be suitable for the soils, for the environment?” Harvell asked.

Councilman Dennis Maloney said he was on the council that purchased the land and said multiple times he was disappointed the project wouldn’t come to fruition.

“I would like to have this go back to our parks advisory board and have them hold meetings and invite the public in and say, ‘Hey, this is what happened,’” Maloney said. “It’s not the city’s fault. The geoenvironmental engineer made a bad call on this soil and this what we’re stuck with. What do you guys recommend we do?”

Councilwoman Elizabeth Cunha reminded the council and city staff there were members of the local baseball community at the ballpark's groundbreaking last fall and said they should make an effort for local diamond sport stakeholders to be aware of when meetings about any future ballpark project would be had. Mayor John Nichols echoed Cunha's comments.

"This was a step forward in our effort to provide good, quality baseball fields for our citizens and our community and I think that was a part of our original intent," Nichols said. "So, that last point I think needs to be emphasized that we do need to direct staff to pursue other opportunities, options, locations for baseball fields."

By Alex Miller

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