

Birmingham city councilors gave Mayor Larry Langford a collective nod to move forward on a multi-million dollar plan to overhaul Fair Park, and potentially jump start redevelopment in the oft-neglected west side of town.

✘ The seven councilors present at Thursday's Committee of the Whole meeting questioned how the city could shift earmarked bond funds to pay for the park concept, when the previous administration told them shifting funds wasn't possible. Nevertheless, they unanimously agreed that Langford could hire an architect and begin the process of bringing to life an Olympic-style sports, entertainment, retail and residential complex on the 40-acre site.

Langford could barely contain his joy at the councilors' decision. "For the first time, you have city councilors saying, if you take a little money out of my district for the good of the city, it's okay."

He assured the councilors that the city could re-direct existing bond funds, now sitting in the bank, from other district projects to the Fair Park project. Once that area of town is stabilized, he said, revenues generated by businesses and other activities at the park can help revitalize other parts of the city.

In addition to bond funds, Langford said the city could also use its community block grant funds to leverage other federal dollars. And he said private developers could also put their own money into the project. He will offer them 100-year leases for \$1 a year as an incentive. He estimated the project's total cost to be between \$75 and \$90 million.

Langford said he planned to ask the Birmingham School Board to put \$10 million toward the project. "They can use some of the interest off the \$350-plus million I sent to them when I was on the County Commission," he said.

Like other school systems in Jefferson County, Birmingham City Schools received millions for capital and technology improvements from the commission's billion-dollar bond issue, funded by a penny sales tax increase he helped orchestrate in 2004. The money sits in escrow until the schools need it. Langford said he hasn't yet approached the school board about the proposal, but was optimistic they would agree, since its students and coaches would have first right to use the facilities - for free.

The proposed park features an indoor swimming facility with an Olympic-sized pool, indoor and outdoor tracks and playing fields, an equestrian center for horseback riding, an area for go-carts, and man-made lakes. The complex also includes a family fun center, and new mixed-use buildings with sports and other retail shops on ground floors, and affordable housing units on top floors. On-site programs will include sports psychology and health training, among others, for schoolchildren and the community.

The park plan also include upgrades to the existing Bill Harris Arena and the Birmingham International Raceway. Across the street, the old circular parking deck would be turned into a spot for skateboarders and roller skaters.

Langford said the center could host track and swim meets not just for Birmingham schools, but for the entire region. He also said the SIAC ([Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference](#)) has already expressed interest in using the facilities for their future track meets.

He didn't know when the park proposal would come up for a formal vote before the Council. But if he could get started soon, key components of the park could be up and running within 24 months, he predicted. He also said the complex would become self-sustaining, with half of its tax revenues set aside in an escrow fund to maintain the complex over time.

"This is so doable, it's a crying shame," he said before the councilors' vote.

City Council President Carole Smitherman praised the total concept, envisioned by staffer Renee

Kemp-Rotan, and Langford for his leadership. "You have been able to tap into what people want, not only our hopes and dreams for now, but in the future."

Howell is the editor in chief of [Birmingham View](#), where [this story was first posted earlier today](#).