

Shelby Farms design firm selected

Field operations suggested a million trees, art, bigger lake

By Pamela Perkins

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Some people seem to like the idea of a million new trees for Shelby Farms Park.

It's one of the concepts that helped field operations (which does not capitalize its name), a New York City landscape design firm, beat out two other firms to win the \$450,000 contract to create the park's master plan calling for long-term ecological health fixes, traffic circulation improvements, recreation programs and revenue-generating ventures.

The nonprofit Shelby Farms Park Conservancy officials will officially announce the winner at 10 a.m. today at the park's Visitors Center. Representatives of field operations will attend the announcement, but could not be reached for comment for this story.

"Now, it's time to go to work," said Barbara Hyde, chairwoman of the conservancy's master plan committee. She said the conservancy will begin working with the firm on the final design.

Today's announcement is the latest milestone on the road to sculpting the 4,500-acre site of rolling hills, lakes, forests and Agricenter International facilities into one of the nation's premier urban parks.

In December 2006, Shelby County adopted a conservation easement that protects the park from severe commercial development for the next 50 years. Last August, it contracted with the nonprofit conservancy to run the park for the next 10 years.

Thirty-three design firms answered a call last fall to compete for the master plan contract. The list was narrowed to three to develop and present their concepts: field operations, New York-based Hargreaves Associates, and Tom Leader Studio of Berkeley, Calif.

There were two rounds of soliciting public input on the proposals and a nearly month-long design exhibit displaying the visions of the three firms. As the winner, field operations may take elements from the other two plans to create the final design.

"It was a difficult decision because all three worked incredibly hard and were really engaged in the opportunity to think in exciting ways about Shelby Farms. There were great ideas in each of those three plans," Hyde said.

But conservancy officials chose field operations, in part based on its ability to listen and respond to the views of the public and the agency as well as its apparent passion for the park.

Though the conservancy is still tabulating the public surveys from the competition, many survey respondents also were drawn to the firm's "very deft and light touch" in preserving the park's ecology, Hyde said.

"For example, the million trees concept, properly executed, will create new ecosystems, add shade ... and still preserve the rolling landscape and vistas that draw people there," she said.

The final design should be completed this summer, then submitted to county Mayor A C Wharton and the County Commission for approval.

Depending on the final cost, Larry Papasan, the conservancy's former interim executive director, has said the agency plans to raise \$50 million to \$100 million to fund the improvements.

Although no other formal public input sessions are planned, citizens can still contact the conservancy with comments.

"This is a public asset and we will always listen to public input about the process," Hyde said. "The door will never be shut."

Park design winner

A New York City-based design firm called field operations vied with two other firms in a recent design competition for the Shelby Farms Park's master plan contract and won.

The firm's signature landscape design projects include transforming an old Staten Island, N.Y., landfill into Fresh Kills Park and an elevated rail line into the High Line Park in Manhattan.

Here are a few of the firm's ideas for Shelby Farms:

A million new trees

Shelby Farms School, a charter school with a multiple sports complex open to the public

Patriot Lake tripled in size to 160 acres

Amphitheater

A public bus route running every 20 minutes at peak times from Downtown to the park

A 3-D art mound atop the old landfill with large-scale, rotating outdoor sculptures

For more information or to comment, call the Shelby Farms Park Conservancy at 767-7275 or visit shelbyfarmspark.org.

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