

Legoland considers building theme park in Stafford County

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Legoland is considering building a new family-friendly theme park in Stafford County that would be only the third of its kind in the nation.



Government officials are in the preliminary stages of considering an incentives package to woo the park to the Centreport Parkway area off Interstate 95. The decision could hinge on the financial impact the interactive, child-oriented theme park could bring.

legoland.jpg

In an Oct. 2 letter to Legoland's general manager of development John Ussher labeled "confidential," County Administrator Anthony Romanello confirmed the county is committed to meeting the company's needs, pending the outcome of a financial analysis. A copy was anonymously mailed to The Free Lance-Star this week.

"Please know that Stafford is the right place for this development, and we intend to become an extension of your team as you mobilize on this important project," Romanello wrote.

The Lego-themed parks are owned and operated by Merlin Entertainments Group. The British company runs other amusement parks and attractions, including the Madame Tussauds wax museums and Sea Life aquariums across the United States. It is the largest such company in Europe and the second largest in the world behind Walt Disney Parks and Resorts.

"It's quite noteworthy that a company like Legoland has its eye on Stafford County," Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Susan Stimpson said Tuesday.

Other U.S. sites are also under consideration. A spokeswoman in Legoland's England office said the company is "nowhere near" a decision.

"The decision-making processes relating to the development of a potential major new theme park is a very long and complicated one, and we would never comment on any project until it is finally approved by our own Board, and we have obtained agreements with all key stakeholders. No plans are at that stage for LEGOLAND in the USA," Sally Ann Wilkinson, head of corporate affairs for Merlin Entertainments, wrote in an email.

Should Legoland select Stafford, the company could invest tens of millions of dollars in the county and bring hundreds of jobs, Romanello said in interview Tuesday.

Stafford hired Washington-based Brailsford & Dunlavey to independently evaluate Legoland's projected financial impact, including how much money visitors may spend directly at the park, as well as area hotels and restaurants.

"The ripple effects are endless," Deputy County Administrator and Economic Development Director Tim Baroody said.

While saying there could be a "dramatically positive impact" on Stafford, Stimpson noted that the board has not made a decision on whether to offer incentives. Supervisors also want to know more about the impact on traffic and other county services, she said.

Legoland has two styles of entertainment venues. The theme parks offer child-size rides and shows, along with interactive attractions and building challenges. The smaller discovery centers are ideal for two to three hours of indoor playing.

Of the five theme parks worldwide, two are in America—one opened in San Diego County, Calif., in 1999, and the newest and largest opened in 2011 in Lakeland, Fla., between Orlando and Tampa. A sixth is expected to open in Malaysia next year.

Legoland parks are geared toward families with children between the ages of 2 and 12, who can let their imaginations run wild while exploring a world made of the colorful toy bricks. Unlike many other amusement parks, roller coasters aren't the focus.

This isn't the first time Legoland has looked at the Fredericksburg area for a possible entertainment complex. Fitz Johnson, president of Johnson Realty Advisors, said he showed Legoland officials several sites along Interstate 95 more than a decade ago, but the company didn't pursue a local investment then.

The company is looking at land owned by Dan Melrod and The Peterson Cos. along Centreport Parkway, according to Romanello's letter. Peterson is developing National Harbor outside Washington. Melrod and Peterson officials couldn't be reached for comment.

The Centreport Parkway corridor has remained largely underused despite the new interchange being built nearly a decade ago to serve the Stafford Airport.

Romanello said he has consulted with his counterparts in Hanover and James City counties, homes to Kings Dominion and Busch Gardens. He was told the amusement parks are "good neighbors and great revenue generators."

Earlier this year, Stafford received authority from the General Assembly to levy an admissions tax at one unidentified economic prospect. That tax would be on ticket sales—up to 10 percent of the cost—at the entertainment venue that'd be at least 75 acres, and it would expire in July 2015 if no venue exists.

Romanello said the county could ask the state to alter the deadline if need be, if Legoland does become a reality.

Over the past year, the Stafford Board of Supervisors has discussed Legoland in closed session several times. Stimpson said she and other members of the board are familiar with Legoland personally, having visited with their children.

“It is a wonderful family place,” she said.

Like the other locations, a Stafford park would likely be open dawn to dusk, and wouldn't hold late-night events, Romanello said.

A team of economic development staff and county officials visited the Florida location in January, and are continuing to build a relationship with the company.

The board is expected to review the results of the financial analysis in November, and then will give direction as to what a next step may be. Romanello would not identify incentives that might be offered, but the county could provide something to Legoland by the end of the calendar year.

“Everything is very preliminary,” Stimpson said, “and we're making ourselves available to any and all business that want to locate here.”

Staff reporter Bill Freehling contributed to this story.

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