

Planning the Georgia International Horse Park

During the late 1980s, the city of Conyers, Georgia, which owns and operates the water and wastewater system for both Conyers and Rockdale County, began researching alternative methods of wastewater disposal. Like many communities, Conyers was facing increasingly stringent federal and state guidelines regarding wastewater discharges into rivers.

One solution is a process called land application, which involves spraying treated wastewater on such green areas as grass and trees. The wastewater is not treated to the levels required for discharge into streams, but it still is sanitary for use on athletic fields and golf courses.

City officials found that in order to expand the city's wastewater treatment capabilities, it would be better to use the land application process, and in 1990 the city identified a 1,139-acre tract of land located in a less-developed portion of Rockdale County as a site suitable for land application. Working with its engineers, the city decided that the site would meet the land application needs.

Community Needs

Due to the expense of the property, the city manager and the city council felt it would be advisable to find additional uses for the property. Clearly, purchase of the property would be more acceptable to the community if the city also could demonstrate additional uses that would meet community needs.

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Site of

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'96 Olympic

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Equestrian

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Events

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Amy Forté

Earlier in 1990, Conyers and Rockdale County had jointly adopted a Comprehensive Land Use Plan. This plan identified a deficit in park and recreational space throughout the community. City leaders also recognized the need for a civic center or conference center facility because the local governments and local businesses were faced with the problem of inadequate facilities for large meetings, performances, and public gatherings. City officials hoped to construct a hotel/conference center facility on the property, as well as to develop a public golf course.

To the initial dismay of local officials, a feasibility study revealed that a hotel/conference center was not practicable. In exploring other recreational opportunities, however, a consultant reported that state-of-the-art equestrian facilities would be feasible and desirable. According to the study, the state of Georgia was lacking a permanent facility suitable for hosting local, regional, national, and international competitions. Research indicated that thousands of horse enthusiasts throughout the state were eager to obtain show and competition facilities.

Such a facility would be feasible economically, compatible with land application, and would provide additional recreational needs, including athletic fields and a public golf course. City officials welcomed the idea and began to explore ways of making it a reality.

The 1996 Summer Centennial Olympics

September 18, 1990, was a momentous day in the history of Atlanta. It was the day the city of Atlanta was awarded the bid to host the 1996 Summer Olympiad.

But this news had a significant effect on the city of Conyers' hopes of developing an equestrian complex. The plan for the 1996 Summer Games included developing facilities

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to host the equestrian events at a site only 30 minutes from Conyers, and city officials knew that if the events were held at a site located close to Conyers, it would make Conyers' plan impractical. So city officials decided the only way to make the city's plan for the equestrian complex a reality was by hosting the 1996 Olympic equestrian events. This plan began to come alive when local leaders learned that the site originally slated to host the equestrian events would not be hosting them after all. The Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) would be looking for another site.

Bringing the Team Together

Conyers and Rockdale County officials eagerly agreed to join forces in the effort to win the bid to host the equestrian events. They agreed that winning the bid would accomplish many goals for the community, and that it would enable them to construct a permanent facility using substantial investment from the Olympic Committee.

City and county officials then asked the Conyers/Rockdale Chamber of Commerce to join the effort. The chamber already had backed the concept of attempting to win an Olympic venue.

Local residents often have felt that our community lacked an identity. Officials with the city of Conyers, Rockdale County, and the chamber of commerce realized that winning the equestrian events would rapidly and significantly enhance the community's identity. Local leaders also knew that improving the image would significantly improve the area's economic development capabilities.

The team that now had been brought together continued to use the services of the real estate and economic development consultant who had been with the project since its inception. At this point, another consultant, a public relations and marketing firm, was added. Its responsibility was to work with the entire team to assist with community public relations, as well as working with the Atlanta media. Throughout the project, the public relations consultants provided assistance and advice on key issues.

The team also was expanded to include the engineers for the water and wastewater system. These engineers worked on conducting soils and drainage studies and provided technical information related to the land application process. Finally, a sports facilities architect, who was also an experienced horseman, pro-

vided critical insight in conceptualizing the overall equestrian complex.

The Conyers-Rockdale Equestrian Task Force

Both city and county officials agreed that the only way to be successful was to make sure the entire project was a community effort. If local business leaders and community residents felt that they were being forced into something, they would automatically oppose it. Conyers and Rockdale County residents, like constituents everywhere, want a choice and a role in their governments. Local officials wanted to garner overwhelming support so that the community could play a vital role in the effort to win the Olympic bid.

Consequently, a group of about one hundred local leaders, business owners, and community residents were asked to attend an informational meeting to hear about the project and to serve on the Conyers-Rockdale Equestrian Task Force. Not surprisingly, many thought the local leaders were being completely unrealistic. Some of those present probably thought worse than that! After all, who would think that a neighboring community of 55,000 people could be selected as an Olympic venue? But as their questions were answered and the project was explained, the room began to swell with enthusiasm and spirit.

The task force was charged with gathering support from local and regional horse enthusiasts and developing community support through education and special events. It was led by a steering committee of nine local leaders, including representatives from the city, the county, and the chamber of commerce, and chaired by a local businesswoman and community volunteer.

Although no one working directly on the project had extensive knowledge of horses or horse competitions, research uncovered many ex-

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perienced horse enthusiasts who could provide the necessary technical support. The chamber of commerce, as a more neutral entity than the local governments, served as the clearinghouse and contact point for the project. Expenses were billed to the chamber and paid equally by the city and the county.

While the task force sought local and equestrian support, the steering committee worked on developing the concept to be submitted to ACOG.

The Plan

The steering committee knew that in order to win the bid, the proposal had to accomplish several goals. First, it had to meet the specifications of the International Equestrian Federation, which is responsible for the equestrian events at all Olympic

Games. Second, the proposal had to make sense from a business perspective. It had to be the smartest, most cost-effective, and most practical proposal that the ACOG would receive. Third, it must demonstrate use of the facilities after the Olympic Games. This component the committee emphasized as the "Olympic legacy." ACOG was led by shrewd businessmen, but with a lot of heart. Therefore, the proposal had to be both a practical and an emotional winner.

It had two advantages from the outset. First, Conyers and Rockdale County are located only 25 miles from downtown Atlanta, bisected by a major interstate. Second, the proposed site was undeveloped, allowing ACOG to design and construct the Olympic facilities exactly as they desired. But it needed something more, something unique and something permanent.

Thus was born the Georgia International Horse Park, which combines equestrian facilities and public recreational facilities into one master plan. The park goes well beyond the facilities required for hosting the Olympic equestrian events. The expanded scope includes museums, a thoroughbred hall of fame, a restaurant and gift shop, indoor show arena, dressage arena, show-jumping arena, stables and practice areas, steeplechase track, polo fields, a three-quarter-mile track, a golf course, a campground, soccer fields, baseball and softball fields, and tennis courts.

The premise of the Georgia International Horse Park is to provide a permanent equestrian complex that will meet the needs of all equestrians, from the backyard enthusiast to the Olympic competitor, while also providing recreational opportunities for community residents to enjoy.

The Proposal

The Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games disseminated a

lengthy RFP allowing approximately three weeks to complete and return.

Working under a tight deadline, the steering committee and the real estate/economic development consultant gathered and compiled the information. The steering committee, determined to do more than was expected, also included a narrative about the community, profiles of the most instrumental community leaders, and color photographs.

The entire document was 100 pages printed on glossy 10" x 10" paper, and it was bound. The cover was a high-gloss black with the task force's logo stamped in gold foil. The overall effect was professional, classy, and impressive. The content was well written and informative.

The steering committee had also decided to submit a video proposal with the written proposal. Since the written proposal had all of the necessary technical information that ACOG would need, the video proposal had to be creative and emotional. This tied in well with the two-pronged, intellectual and emotional, approach to the bid.

A private production company produced the six-minute video, which was originally shot entirely on film and then transferred to video. This gave the final video a higher quality than if it had originally been shot on videotape.

The steering committee worked with the production company in writing the script. Once the script was finalized the shooting began, using only local residents as the actors. They performed remarkably well and more professionally than one might have expected. It was considered important to use only local people and settings in order to demonstrate the community support as well as the "believability" of the proposal.

The final video was an inspiring story of an Olympic hopeful interwoven with the community's dream to host the 1996 equestrian events at the Georgia International Horse Park.

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The Olympic Site Visit

There was still one more hurdle: the community was required to host a visit from members of the International Equestrian Federation and the American Horse Shows Association. This site visit was critical, because if these delegates did not approve the site, ACOG could not give it consideration. Two-weeks' advance notice of the visit would be given, and the delegates would want to tour the site from 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

On August 7, 1991, three national and international representatives and two ACOG representatives arrived by helicopter at the landing pad of the local hospital. This facility was chosen to begin the presentation for several reasons: it had a landing pad, and the delegation was coming by helicopter; this semiformal envi-

ronment would facilitate introductions and opening comments; it would demonstrate the community's intellectual and technological facets by showing them Rockdale Hospital and the new, state-of-the-art women's resource center; and it would allay any concern about medical care, a major factor in selecting Olympic venues.

Once they arrived at the hospital conference room, the agenda for the morning was distributed, and steering committee members began the presentation with some technical information. Later, the delegates and the participants went, by police escort, to a location on the proposed site. Their vehicles were marked with magnetic signs proclaiming "The Georgia International Horse Park, Conyers, Georgia." The police held traffic at each intersection, enabling us to arrive at the site in a few minutes.

The heat in Georgia during the summertime is a concern for equestrians everywhere. Yet it was decided, in fairness, to hold the remainder of the presentations outdoors. Once the group was on the site, the most technical portion of the presentation began. Leaders and consultants provided information on the soils, the temperature fluctuations, wind patterns, topography, and so forth. The guests then went, in four-wheel drive vehicles, to inspect the site. Although the terrain was undeveloped, and the tour rather rough, the delegates spent considerable time riding and walking the entire 1,139 acres of land.

When they had seen everything there, they were given lunch and a final presentation at a farm adjacent to the property. For approximately 30 minutes delegates and participants informally talked together and got to know each other better. This point in the presentation was critical because it would allow the delegates to feel the enthusiasm, excitement, and support within the community.

The luncheon allowed further opportunity for conversation. When the meal was nearly finished, a presentation was given about one part of the Horse Park proposal, a therapeutic horsemanship program that provides programs for mentally and physically disabled youngsters and adults. It included an actual demonstration with youngsters and their horses.

When the delegates lifted off in their helicopter, the feeling among those present was euphoric! Both the technical information and the sentiment had been successfully conveyed.

The Announcement

The wait began. Announcement of the awarding of the equestrian venue was promised for shortly after Labor Day. There were delays, however, and September came and went. As time passed people began to feel less posi-

tive. Phone calls came from people connected with other venue-hopefuls claiming they had been awarded the venue. But it had been our policy from the beginning to contact the ACOG as little as possible and not to attempt to use any influence or do any game playing.

Then October 21, 1991, arrived. Local officials were contacted and asked to meet with ACOG officials at their headquarters in Atlanta. When they returned, they had good news: the 1996 Olympic equestrian events had been awarded to the Georgia International Horse Park!

Epilogue

From the beginning, the approach to competing for the equestrian venue was to treat it as if it was an economic development prospect. The concepts, goals, and procedures were

the same as when competing for a major industry. The challenges were the same types of challenges every community faces when vying for an industry.

As can happen in communities with multiple local governments, Conyers and Rockdale County do not always agree. What was unique was their solution to the challenges. By facing the challenges with a creative and innovative stance and by finding a role for everyone to play, they have the opportunity to host the Olympic equestrian events and to construct a multimillion-dollar, state-of-the-art equestrian complex and recreational park. What's more, the spin-off is the creation of new jobs and a new tourism industry for this region. **DM**

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