

Back to the future may be answer for Fresno's Granite Park

By George
Hostetter



Terance Frazier, a Fresno developer, plans to join another developer in fixing up Granite Park and making it the recreation hub it was meant to be. MARK CROSSE — Fresno Bee Staff Photo | [Buy Photo](#)

-
-
-



Maybe the only thing Granite Park needs is a fresh start with the original idea.

That's the message being pitched by veteran Fresno developer Terance Frazier to a City Hall desperate to turn the expensive, city-owned failure into something of lasting value.



Frazier and local businessman TJ Cox say they want to refurbish Granite Park's replica ballparks, build another ballpark and add new recreational opportunities. They say they have the deep pockets and managerial expertise to succeed where the first developer and a string of starry-eyed successors failed.



And just in case anyone is curious, they add, their proposal seeks not a penny in city subsidies, city-funded improvements or city-backed loans.

"We want to turn what is basically a weed patch into a recreational amenity," Cox says.

Adds Frazier: “There are pioneers and there are people who sit on the sidelines and yell at the pioneers and the entrepreneurs. I’m willing to get out there and try. If nobody tries, things never get done.”

City Council members on Thursday reviewed the Frazier-Cox deal in closed session. They took no action.

Council Member Lee Brand, who arrived at City Hall just as the Granite Park project was imploding, says a deal might be possible.

“All we’ve got now is an eyesore that costs the city money,” Brand says. “Here’s an opportunity to make it into a nice recreational opportunity.”

First-term Council Member Paul Caprioglio, who represents the Granite Park area, says he wants something in writing before passing judgment.

“I want to make the facility work for our taxpayers and our kids,” Caprioglio says. “But the devil is in the details.”

Details are sketchy at this point. But the two developers and Brand (being careful not to reveal anything confidential from the council’s closed-door meeting) describe the highlights this way:

- Frazier-Cox would lease Granite Park’s nearly 20 acres, perhaps for \$1 a year.
- The three replica major-league ballparks — Fenway Park, Wrigley Field, AT&T Park — would be rehabilitated.
- A fourth ballpark, big enough to handle 90-foot base paths, would be built.
- Other athletic venues, such as two soccer fields and volleyball courts, would be added.
- Player/fan amenities, such as a restaurant, would be plentiful.
- The developers pay for all this.
- City Hall would continue its current payment toward security and maintenance, estimated at \$100,000 annually.
- The city owns all tenant improvements should the project fail.

The developers’ administrative structure is still evolving. It’s enough at this point to note that a nonprofit foundation at the top of the pyramid will contract with the nonprofit Central Cal Baseball Academy (Frazier is president) to manage Granite Park operations.

Cox is president of Fresno-based Central Valley NMTC, a limited liability company. The initials stand for New Markets Tax Credit, a federal program designed to spur development in low-income communities. Council President Oliver Baines is a member of Central Valley NMTC’s advisory board, according to the company’s website.

Bottom line: Frazier and Cox say they have up to \$2 million to invest in Granite Park’s rebirth.

Albatross of epic proportions

City Hall has come to hate the words “Granite Park.” Critics at council meetings routinely cite Granite Park along with the Metropolitan Museum and Chukchansi Park as proof that city officials should never be left unattended with taxpayer money.

Granite Park is actually two separate operations located side-by-side on about 40 acres in east-central Fresno. The idea some 15 years ago was that a nonprofit foundation would have sports activities on half the site while a for-profit entity would fill the other half with shops and restaurants.

Each half would complement the other. The presence of Highway 168 along the site’s east boundary would make

Granite Park a regional attraction. The nonprofit side and the for-profit side, headed by essentially the same executives, would become a smooth team.

City Hall loved everything. That part of Fresno, a mile or so south of Fresno State, would get much-needed green space and commercial activity. All risk would be shouldered by the private sector.

Then the developer in 2004 went hat in hand to City Hall. He needed a city guarantee on a \$5 million bank loan to maintain cash-flow. It took several months (into early 2005) and two council votes, but city officials finally jumped on board with the guarantee.

The future held nothing but disaster. The developer went bankrupt, the city paid off the loan in the midst of the Great Recession and the retail portion's nightclub area went through one soap opera-like farce after another.

City Hall got stuck with the ballfields in March 2010 at a public auction when no one bid on the property. Wits with a cynical temperament talked about the "curse of Granite Park."

Would-be saviors popped up periodically. There was the risk-taker in 2012 who wanted to partner with the Public Utilities Department. The latter would turn Granite Park into a groundwater recharge basin, then he would turn the pond into a wakeboarding park.

Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle.

But two things appear different this go-around.

First, the mood at City Hall is changed. City officials during the Great Recession couldn't get past their fear of bankruptcy. The budget is now on the rebound. General plan, Fulton Corridor, water, potholes, parks — city officials are ready to actually do something.

Second, Frazier, unlike the original developer, is no rookie to high-risk, high-profile projects. In fact, he played a relatively small role as a lender in the early Granite Park drama. He says he got his money back, perhaps the ultimate resumé-enhancer.

"I feel like God gave me some insights of what needs to happen here in Fresno," says Frazier, a former Fresno State and minor league baseball player. "Baseball saved me. This is my way of giving back.

And what about the Granite Park Curse?

"Granite Park? What's that?" Frazier says. "I'm talking about the Central California Sports Complex."

Contact George Hostetter: ghostetter@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6272 or [@GeorgeHostetter](https://twitter.com/GeorgeHostetter) on Twitter.