

City of Burnside creates special purpose governmental entity to develop Burnside Island State Park

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Dream Big Burnside Authority will seek to add lodge, restaurants, conference center and other amenities through a public-private partnership

With the desire to dream big and realize Burnside Island State Park's full potential as a tourism destination, the Burnside City Council voted today to create a special purpose governmental entity to develop the island.

The Dream Big Burnside Authority, a joint effort between the City of Burnside and the Somerset-Pulaski Economic Development Authority (SPEDA), will seek to enter into an agreement with the Commonwealth of Kentucky to add a lodge, restaurants, a conference center and other amenities to the property through a public-private partnership (P3). Dream Big Burnside will have a nine-member board comprised of tourism and economic development professionals from across Pulaski County.

“I am thrilled to be taking the first step in making Burnside, ‘The Only Town on Lake Cumberland,’ a complete destination for visitors,” Burnside Mayor Robert Lawson said. “Our island is a beautiful outdoor gem in southern Kentucky. We want more people to be able to stay here, eat here, play here, and enjoy everything it has to offer. Further developing the island will give them that opportunity while significantly boosting our local economy.”

Somerset-Pulaski Economic Development Authority (SPEDA) President Chris Girdler presented the proposal to create Dream Big Burnside to the council Monday at its regular monthly meeting. Following a special-called meeting today to approve the second reading of the ordinance, Girdler applauded the council and Lawson for their vision and commitment to seeing Burnside Island thrive.

“People have talked about wanting to develop Burnside Island for more than five decades,” Girdler said. “but there has never been this kind of effort before. This project has a broad base of community support. It’s a bold and unprecedented move and I am incredibly grateful to Mayor Lawson and members of Burnside City Council for being willing to make this vision a reality.”

Dream Big Burnside’s goal will be to accomplish what the late Gov. A.B. “Happy” Chandler set out to do in 1958 when the U.S. Congress transferred the title for Burnside Island to the Commonwealth of Kentucky to create a public park. According to the Congressional Record, following an initial development phase that included a recreation area with a swimming pool, picnic tables, grills, a group camp, tent/trailer area and golf course, Chandler envisioned the second phase of development would include “a central building, eating and sleeping accommodations, and the like,” according to a letter from the state’s commissioner of conservation at that time.

Though the state has attempted to deliver on the second phase of the project through the years, it has not happened for a variety of reasons. When talks of further developing the island resumed more than a year ago, SPEDA and the City of Burnside engaged P3 specialists Frost Brown Todd LLC to help move the project forward. The firm reviewed prior litigation threats from an heir of one of the island’s original landowners and found the claims are without merit, Girdler said.

Attorneys from Frost Brown Todd explained that the strength in an authority like Dream Big Burnside lies in its ability to operate independently, engage a board of professionals with expertise in economic development and tourism, and have a regional impact.

Lawson will appoint the board’s nine members. Six of those will represent the City of Burnside, while SPEDA, Pulaski County Fiscal Court and the City of Somerset will each nominate members for consideration for the other three slots. The Dream Big Burnside board will be able to make contract decisions without city council approval — removing politics from

the situation and streamlining decision making — though the City of Burnside will maintain oversight through its selection of board members. Allowing other city and county entities to be represented allows for diverse perspectives with far-reaching influence, attorneys noted.

Somerset Mayor Alan Keck said he is excited to partner in this effort, as enhancing Burnside Island as a tourism destination will undoubtedly benefit the community as a whole.

“This is yet another way we are collaborating to make our corner of the state shine a little brighter,” Keck said. “I greatly appreciate Mayor Lawson for bringing Somerset into the fold so that we can work together to give visitors of The Capital of Lake Cumberland an outstanding experience.”

Pulaski County Judge-Executive Steve Kelley said he is excited to see the progress Burnside is making.

“They have suffered difficult times since the Wolf Creek Dam repairs, and the severe loss of tourism revenue as a result,” Kelley said. “Now they appear to be moving full steam ahead, and I’m thrilled to see Burnside Island State Park entering into a bright new future! Things are looking great all over Pulaski County!”

Dream Big Burnside board members include:

- Rodney Casada, businessman, entrepreneur and former resident of Burnside
- J.C. Tucker, businessman and entrepreneur
- Michelle Allen, Lake Cumberland Tourism Director and City of Somerset representative
- Gary Eaton, Pulaski County Fiscal Court representative
- George Bryant, Burnside City Council, investor and real estate
- Molly Hardy, Burnside City Attorney
- Frank Crabtree, Burnside Tourism director
- Ryan Godby, CPA and Burnside Tourism board member
- Chris Girdler, SPEDA and Dream Big Burnside chairman

The next step for Dream Big Burnside is to pursue a written agreement with the state to formalize a state-local partnership to develop the island. Burnside will soon have an option agreement to purchase a 63-acre property overlooking the island, which could be developed with recreation and lodging amenities along with the rest of the property. The group is using the development of Lake Lanier, Georgia, as its guide, which was accomplished through a similar state-local partnership.

Preserving the nature of the island, remaining a part of the state parks system and continuing to offer a premier camping experience for visitors will remain top priorities. Members of the authority will be engaged and will listen to the community’s needs and wishes, Girdler said.

“Burnside Island has an already robust recreational infrastructure, but we would be missing an incredible opportunity if we didn’t do everything we can to enhance this park and make it a destination,” Girdler said. “We want someone who can take what Burnside Island has to offer and complete the experience for visitors so they can find everything they need all in one place.”

DREAM BIG
Burnside

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