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## Garden Grove may ride to future

*City Council votes to let an investment group come up with plan for a theme park -- just three miles from that famous one in Anaheim.*

November 30, 2006 | Dave McKibben | Times Staff Writer

After years of failed efforts to land some sort of tourist attraction, the Garden Grove City Council has agreed to let an investment firm move forward with plans to construct a \$4-billion amusement park in a city best known for its annual strawberry festival.

The park, which would include three resort-style hotels, would be built on a 150-acre site on Harbor Boulevard, three miles down the road from Disneyland.

The plan's backers also told the council that they wanted to invest an additional \$4 billion to build a nearby retail and entertainment complex.

Though details were sketchy and the source of the investor's money is murky, council members enthusiastically embraced the theme-park plan, voting 5-0 Tuesday night to begin a 90-day negotiating period with the Los Angeles-based investment firm, TL Properties.

As part of the agreement, the company -- which represents Korean interests -- must put up \$500,000, hire theme-park consultants, develop a preliminary concept and provide details on funding for the project.

Michael Lim, a TL Properties consultant, said the company was formed solely for the purpose of building a theme park, and he identified its president as Korean American Chris Yang, a Los Angeles building inspector who has a doctorate in quantum physics from Hamburg University in Germany.

"It has always been his dream to build an amusement park, but we have no background in this," said Lim, adding that his company is backed by a Hong Kong investment firm.

He added that he has contacted numerous movie studios, including Universal, Paramount and MGM, in hopes of developing a theme for the park.

Rich Harrill, director of International Tourism Research at the University of South Carolina, said the project could be successful if it doesn't try to compete with Disneyland.

"With that kind of money, it should be a global attraction and complement Disneyland," said Harrill, who consults with counties and cities on tourism planning and development. "Leisure time and discretionary income are growing and so are service and entertainment sectors."

Harrill said Garden Grove officials are smart to seriously consider the proposal.

"Any mayor of any city would consider themselves fortunate to have that kind of investment land on their doorstep," he said.

Another tourism expert said that if Six Flags sells Magic Mountain in Valencia to clear the land for houses, the Garden Grove plan would be even more attractive.

"If that happens, you could argue the 3 million Magic Mountain customers a year are up for grabs," said John Robinett, of Economics Research Associates, a consulting firm to the leisure and real estate industries.

"If an attraction was built to cater toward that niche, there'd be significant demand."

Greg Blodgett, an economic development manager for Garden Grove, said the city is encouraging TL Properties to build a "next-generation park" that would complement Disneyland.

"We're looking at something along the lines of Islands of Adventure, Universal's second park in Orlando," Blodgett said.

Garden Grove has had a run of bad luck over the years with would-be developers who've proposed grand projects designed to give the central Orange County city's struggling downtown an anchor.

The council has heard plans of building a replica of London Bridge across a faux river, a music-themed entertainment complex called Riverwalk, a cultural center dedicated to the late King Hussein of Jordan, a Las Vegas-style-casino and, most recently, an NFL stadium.

This week, council members seemed prepared to put the city's not-so-glorious past behind them.

"It's unusual the money is coming to us first," Councilman Mark Leyes said. "And \$4 billion is nothing to sneeze at. Here, we've got the money up front, instead of an idea and a developer. And that's not such a bad thing."

"It's hard not to embrace this. There's very little risk to the city."

As the Disney Resort has expanded in adjacent Anaheim with Downtown Disney and California Adventure, Garden Grove has added several hotels with 2,500 rooms.

The city has been eyeing a theme park of its own for five years, and a recent city-commissioned study predicted that a theme park could bring up to 7 million

visitors annually with gross revenues of \$350 million the first year.

The 150-acre Harbor Boulevard parcel, a mix of older industrial properties and auto-related businesses, is bounded by Newhope Street on the west, Westminster Avenue on the south and the 22 Freeway to the north.

TL Properties estimates that land and relocation costs could total up to \$2 billion, with an additional \$2 billion for construction.

TL Properties has also expressed interest in buying the city-owned Willowick Golf Course and a 40-acre parcel on Harbor Boulevard for retail and entertainment complexes. Lim said development of those sites would total an additional \$4 billion.

Lim, who began talking to Garden Grove officials six months ago, appeared before the council Tuesday night amid little fanfare. There were only a few people in the council chambers and no one spoke on the proposal. After about 15 minutes of discussion and few questions, the council voted.

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