

**TOURISM BOARD WITHHOLDS
FUNDING OF PLAZA TOURIST CENTER PROJECT**

By Wayne McClintock
12/16/75

Citing "pressure" from the Women's Department of the Chamber of Commerce, the City Board of Development, Tourism, and Conventions today took up in emergency session for the third time a request to fund a tourist information center in the Plaza Theater at \$8,975 for a three-month period—and ended by failing to endorse the request, but agreed to a meeting next Tuesday morning with representatives for more discussion.

Board member Harvey Meston, in the 7 a.m. meeting in the Downtown Holiday Inn, alluded to a letter from the Chamber to Mayor Don Henderson that the project be funded or "he won't be Mayor again." No copy of the letter was shown.

MEMBER LEW Willner said the board's budget does not have the money. He later said, "What it amounts to, is we're putting money into the Plaza Theater."

He made the statement after details of the plan came out that billboards and directional signs would lead tourists to the Plaza Theater where the information center is to be placed in the lobby. Guided tours of the theater are sold there, but tourists getting information would not be obligated to take the tour.

Mrs. Julia Breck, who signed the proposed budget for the center, has been a leading proponent of a previous effort to get the city to put taxpayers' money into shoring up the Plaza as a tourist attraction.

THE PROPOSED budget showed one-time costs of \$200 for directional signs and billboards; \$2,400 for brochures (samples of

which have already been printed); and \$900 for creation of "fun-spot" displays. Monthly expenses would be \$3,500 for operations, including hiring of two "professionals"—one as a hostess and another as a "guide."

Chairman Bill Latham said the new request is scaled down since the first request was for \$9,000 a month.

During discussion, Meston and Willner, who are both involved in travel agency business, said the effort is doomed for failure since three months at this time of the season is the worst for trying such a project. Other board members agreed, but Latham said why not let them fail and it would be the end of the project. All members agreed that the Women's Department has been very energetic in tourism and has done some fine accomplishments.

ALSO DISCUSSED was that the same thing could be done in the Chamber building where there is visitor parking and no rent would have to be paid.

Indeed, in a Nov. 20 special meeting, member Jack Morris had advanced such an idea.

Also in that meeting, City Convention and Visitors Bureau director Gene Strahan told the board that the Plaza effort would be a duplication since his advertising plans "would include the Plaza as a tourist attraction."

At today's emergency meeting, Strahan strongly defended the project.

A motion by Meston, seconded by Morris to approve the project failed to pass with only two no votes and no ayes. The board will meet with proponents at 7 a.m. next Tuesday in Bureau offices.

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RUDY GUTIERREZ/EL PASO TIMES

Cathy Espinosa, right, casts a line into the water as her family holds an outing with the Sanchez family Thursday at Ascarate Park.

ASCARATE ON COMEBACK The Park Is In The Middle Of A Resurgence With Plenty Of Activities

Victor R. Martinez
El Paso Times 4/2/17

Ascarate Park means different things to different people.

Over its 77-year history, the largest public-use recreational park in El Paso County has been home to Sunday cruisers, fishing excursions, weekend softball, weekday golf and countless holiday family outings.

The more than 400-acre park hit its stride from 1960 to 2006 when Western Play land Amusement Park was built and run by Pat Thompson.

The 30-acre amusement park was home to El Paso favorites the Hurricane, Tsunami, El Bandido, Paratrooper, Round up, Tilt-a Whirl, Pharaoh's Fury, Scrambler, Himalaya and more.

“This park used to flourish,” said Sergio Gonzales, who was fishing at the lake last week. “I remember bringing my kids here almost every Sunday for cookouts and fishing. Sometimes they would spend all day at Western Play land and then come out for burgers and hot dogs on the grill. We would even feed the ducks.”

Ascarate Park features an 18-hole golf course and a 9-hole course called the Delta 9, a 48-acre lake, lakeside boardwalk, a fully-equipped aquatic center, playgrounds and picnic facilities.

The park, at 6900 Delta in South-Central El Paso, is in the midst of a resurgence with activities almost every weekend and major events such as the Sun City Fair and the Sun City Music Festival, two of the city’s largest.



RUDY GUTIERREZ/EL PASO TIMES

A worker mows the grass at Ascarate Park Thursday. In the next three months, the park will host festivals, tournaments and other activities.

“Park usage has increased,” said Alexandra South, marketing specialist for El Paso County Parks and Special Events. “It started to get a lot more attention as being a really affordable destination for events of all sizes.”

In the next three months, Ascarate Park will host the Burger and Craft Beer Fest on April 22, several charity 5K runs, a children's fishing tournament on May 13, and monthly free family-friendly movies called the After Sunset film series.

Park entry is free Monday through Friday, however, there is a \$2 per car entry fee on Saturday and Sunday and for special events.

"Last year at this time we had approximately 23,272 visitors on Saturdays and Sundays," South said. "This year to date, we have had over 33,000. That's an increase of 10,000 park visitors on weekends alone."

The park only counts park visitors who drive through the gate on Saturday and Sunday.

"It's a fantastic open space that has been overlooked for so long," she said. "People weren't really aware of it. We are now raising awareness and attracting larger scale events."

She said the fee schedule for major events is also attractive to promoters.

"For the most part our fee schedule makes us a price leader in the market," she said. "It's very affordable,"

Ascarate Park, which opened in 1940, has partially developed into a "runner's park" with several fundraiser-type 5K runs and large-scale events such as the Insane Inflatable 5K and the Color Run.

Mike Coulter, a partner in Race Adventures Unlimited with Chris Rowley, uses Ascarate Park for a number of 5K fundraisers.

"The park provides a safe environment for our runners," he said. "There is absolutely no vehicular traffic, that's the number one

reason we love using the park. Plus, it's in a pleasant setting. People seem to enjoy the park."

Coulter said he sometimes uses Ascarate Park to train on his own.

"It's somewhat of a green space, and we don't have very many of those in the city," he said. "The only other places I enjoy running in within the city limits are Album Park, Edgemere Parkway and Blackie Chester, Memorial Park is too small and hilly for my taste so I would have to put Ascarate in the top five,"

Ascarate Park continues to be an El Paso favorite for a day of fishing, golfing or simply cooking out with the family.

"The park and the lake are a lot cleaner than what it used to be," said Lulu Sanchez, who was recently on an outing with her husband Saul and their 15-year-old son Saul Jr. "The trails are great. We went bike riding all around the park the other day and it was beautiful."

Sanchez, who grew up in the neighborhood near Ascarate Elementary School but now lives in Socorro, said she uses the park two or three times a week either fishing, feeding the ducks or using the trails for walks or cycling.

"I remember when I was a teenager and we would cruise the lake," she said. "Now we're feeding the ducks and fishing. It seems like time changes everything but Ascarate Park will always be a part of my life, that will never change."

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