



Unit Topic for October 2018

City Council to vote upon: Botanic Garden's proposed addition of fees for entrance. A look at opposing viewpoints.

Panel eyes admission fees that could add \$3.7 million in revenue to botanic gardens

BY SANDRA BAKER

sabaker@star-telegram.com

March 19, 2018 07:47 PM

FORT WORTH

The [Fort Worth Botanic Gardens](#) could raise nearly \$3.7 million in new revenue if the city started charging an admission fee, a task force studying the garden's future was told Monday.

The proposed fee of \$12 for adults, \$9 for seniors and \$8 for children would cover access to the entire grounds. Currently, separate fees are charged for the Japanese Garden and the Conservatory, which has been closed for several months because of structural issues.

The Conservatory is just one on a long list of [\\$15 million in repairs](#) needed just to bring the gardens up to par, a consultant's report concludes. Other costly improvements and renovations are needed beyond that.

The task force also learned Monday that an additional \$172,750 could be raised by offering memberships and from private and corporate giving.

About 334,400 people visited the gardens in 2017, two-thirds of whom don't live in Fort Worth. The city subsidizes a little more than \$3 million of the garden's \$5.2 million budget. That funding would continue and be used toward operations and capital improvements.

The garden was established in 1934 and the Japanese Garden in 1973. The gardens have undergone a reorganization of their financial support groups in the last year and are now a special revenue fund of the city.

The task force is also considering discount days and single-use free passes, or designating a section of the park to be free, to make sure the gardens remain accessible.

The task force will host a public meeting before it makes a recommendation to the City Council, which is expected to happen before the July summer break.

Richard Zavala, the [city's parks](#) director, said the task force is trying to get to the most effective recommendation it can.

"This is a very diverse and very engaged group and they are asking a lot of good questions," Zavala said.

"Their recommendation is what is going to make the Fort Worth Botanic Garden reach its full potential and enable us to sustain it for future generations."

Implementing an admission fee would raise the garden's budget to around \$7.5 million in 2019 and \$8.7 million by 2023.

Sandra Baker: 817-390-7727; @SandraBakerFWST

For more information about the Strategic Plan, Task Force Recommendation as well as agendas of the Task Force meetings with documents and presentation, visit <http://www.fwbg.org/strategic-plan>

Keep Fort Worth Botanic Gardens “Everybody’s Garden”

By Karin Cagle, September 12, 2018

One of Fort Worth’s Botanic Garden’s “Key Strengths,” identified in the 2010 Master Plan, is its role as “Everybody’s Garden.” “Fort Worth Botanic Garden, founded in 1933, is the oldest botanic garden in Texas and encompasses 110 acres in Fort Worth’s renowned cultural district.” Unlike many Gardens in comparable cities, FWBG’s land was purchased with public money, rather than established by foundations on private land with private money. Further, FWBG contains extensive infrastructure built by the CCC during the Depression. Except for the Japanese Garden and the now closed Conservatory, the FWBG has been free to the public. That is about to change -- if residents of FW do not act. All documents cited herein are available at <http://www.fwbg.org/strategic-plan/>

The BG Strategic Planning Force, which is not representative of the city’s residents, recommends that the city turn over the park to an independent (unknown) non-profit and charge admissions fee of \$6 for kids 6-15 and \$12 for adults. Recommendation p. 23 and 12. The charges are recommended to begin in 2019.

Why? For years, the FWBG’s management was controlled by the city and two private organizations. This has caused a lack of supervision and coordination; and it resulted in a purported need of up to \$15,600,000, for deferred maintenance (\$6-7 mil) and capital projects (\$6.6 -8.6 mil). See page 22 of EMD report. This is even though the combined revenues versus expenses of the City, Botanic Society and Garden Club showed the FWBG made a profit from 2007 through 2014. See EMD report p. 10. This surplus was generated without funding, or with insufficient funding, for critical positions that handle development, membership, finance/ business operations, curation, events, visitor services, education/public programs, horticulture, maintenance and operations. Recommendations p. 10. This neglect lead to the lack of revenues and, most importantly, decline in the facilities.

But it is not just the “maintenance” money. The 2010 Master Plan calls for big changes to the BG. For example, an expansion to the southwest requiring the purchase of private land and the installation of a tram. Special interests want to make the FWBG a “world class garden” and an “outstanding cultural institution Fort Worth needs and deserves.” Recommendations p. 22. To do this the Strategic Committee recommends using the fees to finance the public debt from a \$10 mil deferred maintenance bond. The remainder is to come from future capital expenditure bonds.

In my opinion, FW does not need a cultural amusement park. FWBG is the City’s only remaining free cultural amenity. It serves many people in many different ways that are not addressed by the strategic plan. I think that we must take steps to maintain the infrastructure and to increase programs that educate our residents about horticulture and the environment. But the desired big-ticket “improvements” should wait.

The city seems to be going down a similar path that lead to the BG’s deterioration, using questionable assumptions and blind faith, just hoping that it will all work out. For example:

In the Recommendation at page 13, the Committee assumes that in 2019 the admission revenues will be almost \$1,000,000. This number is based on questionable attendance estimate and assumes that the first-year visitation will drop by only 20%. Then in 2020, the admission revenues more than double to almost \$2,400,000. Imagine the Yelp reviews of people who paid \$12 to visit the FWBG in its current configuration. The assumptions are baseless and the FWBG’s reputation could be permanently, thoughtlessly, damaged.

The EMD Consultant’s Report, at page 9, states that from 2007-14 the total surplus of revenues “exceeded \$2 mil.” But “the [EMD] project did not include a comprehensive financial audit of past expenditures nor a study of all potential future expenditures for operations or capital improvements.”

The EMD report relied on comparisons to six other gardens that are very different in origin, facilities, or public services available. There was no analysis concerning how FW residents use the Gardens and what they would like to see happen to their Gardens.

The Committee reviewed three management options: City Management, Single Support Group, and License or Management by Independent Non-Profit. Recommendations, p. 21-23. The analysis is negligible and stilted toward Option 3, which is privatization. It acknowledges that the option removes public influence from BG management, justifying this in part because “managing cultural institutions [is no longer] part of the core responsibility of government entities.” A debatable point, and no justification for abridging residents’ access to and influence over a city owned amenity.

To help the medicine go down and to address concerns raised about access for less affluent members of our community, the committee made “Recommended Accessibility Options.” See Addendum to June 19, 2018, Meeting. The recommendations are directed at families receiving public assistance, which is good. But the majority of residents’ needs and abilities are ignored: many middle-income families cannot afford to pay \$100 for a family membership; many kids at non-Title I schools are not included; and seniors are given only a \$2 discount, without consideration as to their financial situation.

“Don’t call it a park!” Residents protesting the fee have been chastised for referring to FWBG as a park. True, it is not a park, and, likewise, the City cannot justify limiting access to the FWBG because residents can visit parks for free. Parks do not offer the aesthetics, plant variety and educational opportunities available at the FWBG. Nor is the FW Zoo a fair comparison or justification for charging fees at the Gardens. True, the FW Zoo developed into a nationally recognized zoological institution after it was privatized and admission fees instituted. But, zoos are not gardens. The humanitarian standards for zoos had changed greatly since the FW Zoo’s creation. The expenses necessary to reform and maintain the zoo at even the lowest standards would take away from our residents’ quality of life. Plants are not animals. The costs maintain the FWBG as a free amenity is not comparable to the financial needs of a zoo. It is only the unnecessary aggrandizement of our Gardens that make the admission fee “necessary.”

The City has set the council’s vote on this important issue for November 6, 2018, which is unacceptable. That is Election Day. It also set the meeting for 10 a.m., rather than the common and more accessible 7 p.m. time. This is unacceptable and must be changed.

In my opinion the city council member, the taskforce and Mayor Price should consider the following suggestions:

- Privatization and the admission fee must be rejected; the impact of fees or alternatives have not been fairly studied.
- Option 2: Single Group Support should be considered with a proven, qualified non-profit that can be financially accountable and support the needed funding for development, membership, finance/ business operations, curation, events, visitor services, education/public programs, and horticulture. Proposals from non-profits should be received and the organizations vetted before the council votes to turn over management of the Gardens.
- FWBG should have been part of the last bond package and must be included on the next one. Fees from the Japanese Garden (and the Conservatory once it is restored) can be used to finance the debt.
- A truly representative advisory panel should be constituted to study and propose ways to improve FWBG without charging admission fees for the currently fee-free areas.
- Energies and money should be directed to maintenance and repairs. The grand improvement ideas in the 2010 Strategic Plan must wait until the city fulfills its obligations to keep FWBG “Everybody’s Garden.”

Unit Discussion Questions

1. To what extent are the fees based in research? What part of the research did you find interesting, concerning or that you have more questions about?
2. Will the fees be used to increase the budget for maintenance or will it be used for renovation?
3. If the park institutes the fees how will it affect the level of access to the gardens and who will it affect the most/least?
4. Will the fees affect how the City of Fort Worth helps to fund the gardens?
5. Is there a plan to eventually privatize the gardens and what will that mean for the City of Fort Worth?