

Chandler aims to turn closed dump into park by 2009

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Mike Cullumber of Chandler looks forward to the day when this landfill will be a park with an archery range. Cullumber is a board member of the Arizona State Archery Association and president of the Papago FITA Archers.

Chandler's first and only landfill is poised to become the Valley's first city park reclaimed from a municipal landfill.

The 40-foot-high mound of dirt on the northwest corner of McQueen and Ocotillo roads will be remade into a park starting next spring, with a possible completion by late 2008 or early 2009.

The planned Paseo Vista Recreation Area will have a playground, picnic areas, a frisbee golf course and an archery range. Equestrian trails will circle its base and tie into the Paseo Trail near the Consolidated Canal.

"It's definitely going to be a unique project," said Mickey Ohland, the city's park development and operations manager.

The park will sit on 2.2 million tons of compacted trash 38-feet deep that will continue to decompose and shift the upper landscape imperceptibly. The movement means the city won't put any hard-core surfaces on top.

24 years of trash

Turning closed landfills into city parks is common in other parts of the country, where land is at a premium. But in Arizona, with its wide-open spaces, the need to re-use land has been less pressing.

Nationally, more than 250 old landfills have been turned into recreational areas, including Flushing Meadow in New York, home of the U.S. Open. The annual hot-air balloon festival in Albuquerque and an international kite festival in Berkeley, Calif., are both held on converted landfills.

In Arizona, closed landfills have been turned into golf courses in Cave Creek and Tucson, and a closed landfill in Lake Havasu City was transformed into a community park. There also are proposals to turn two other landfills in the state into parks and a third into a parking facility, according to the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality.

In Gilbert, a 46-acre Maricopa County landfill that was closed in 1982 was subleased back to the town for the Gilbert Rodeo Park grounds.

But Mount Chandler, or Mud Mountain as it is also called, is the first city landfill in the Valley being turned in a city park. The 64-acre, \$12.8 million project could breathe new life into an area where trash has been a key local issue.

Residents fought city plans several years ago to build a garbage-transfer station at the site, but the landfill remained, towering over the neighborhood.

The landfill opened in 1981 and was closed in October 2005. Even before the closure, city officials proposed remaking the site into a park. The city asked voters in 2004 to approve the sale of more than \$12.8 million in general-obligation bonds to pay for the project. They agreed.

After the landfill was closed, the city added more than two feet of soil. The height is expected to grow by several feet in some areas as the park is landscaped.

Chandler City Councilman Martin Sepulveda said the idea to transform the landfill into a park is an innovative solution to an eyesore.

"It's a fairly generic thing when you try to turn these brownfield sites into something usable, so parks are always a good idea," he said. Michelle Daly, who lives in the Saguaro Canyon development near McQueen and Ocotillo roads, said she likes the idea of the recreation area over the closed landfill.

Daly said she doesn't think it will be odd to play and picnic on a park knowing that 75 feet of compacted, decaying garbage lay below. "You can build almost anything on a landfill depending on how you cap it," she said, adding that she grew up near a landfill in Illinois that was later turned into a park.

Daly said she looks forward to her children using the park when they get older, since the park will have a xeriscape top and activities geared toward older children

New recreation uses

Critics of the project are hard to find.

Instead, several people are looking forward to seeing the next stage of the landfill's development. Mike Cullumber, a Chandler resident who lives about 2 miles from the site, is president of the Papago FITA Archers. He said he's eager to see the completion of an archery range planned for the park. "I think it's a good usage of the land," he said. The archery range is a long, flat piece of land with targets at which archers shoot from varying distances, ranging from 30 yards to 300 yards.

Cullumber said archers need few amenities, although the city is planning to add light shade structures.

Mickey Ohland, the city's park development and operations manager, said the landfill is expected to continue settling as rotting garbage below decays. The settling means the city won't build any hard-court surfaces that could crack. The need for water runoff also limits the type of fields the city can build atop the landfill. Football and soccer fields are out, Ohland said. "We have to be very careful that we don't put anything on top of that that would penetrate the cap," Ohland said.

Keeping a close eye

The city is required to monitor the site for at least 30 years to ensure that decaying garbage doesn't seep into the groundwater table or cause other environmental problems. Bob Fortier, construction project manager for municipal utilities, said a flare station atop the landfill will continue burning off methane gas created from decomposing garbage.

The flare station is on the far eastern edge of the landfill and is not expected to interfere with the park's existing access or amenities planned for the site. The city is relying on environmental engineers to design the park because of its unique nature. "You really have to treat each landfill site by site," Fortier said.

The city solicited public input on the project. "I know there's been a lot of support of it overall," he said. "People are waiting for this and keep calling us, asking, '**Hey, where's the park, where's the park?**'"

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