

# LWR LIFE

LAKWOOD RANCH AREA'S COMMUNITY, NATURE, STYLE  
SUMMER 2022

## Love Required

The satisfying journey  
of raising a guide dog.







Photos by Liz Ramos

Michael Taaffe sees great potential in the park and wants to add new playgrounds, a pavilion, a boathouse and more.

# Beyond Rowing

Michael Taaffe, the chair of the Nathan Benderson Park Conservancy, shares his dreams to make Benderson Park a thriving gathering spot for the surrounding community.

BY LIZ RAMOS | CONTRIBUTOR

Michael Taaffe stood on the rooftop deck of the six-story Benderson Family Finish Tower at Nathan Benderson Park one recent spring afternoon. From that vantage point, Taaffe enjoyed a panoramic view of the 600-acre park.

But his concept for the park goes beyond his sightline.

Taaffe, a partner with Shumaker, Loop & Kendrick, took over as Benderson Park's board chair in September. His big plans for Benderson Park's future still include elite international athletic events but also embrace ways to engage local denizens through better access, new indoor and outdoor exercise and play areas, and community-designed events.

Taaffe notes that, in beginning months of the pandemic when gyms closed, people flocked to Benderson Park to exercise outdoors. He was among the hundreds who came every day to bike, inline skate, walk dogs, run, row and paddle. Two years later? According to Taaffe, even more locals are using Benderson Park as their go-to place to exercise and be outside.

Although Benderson Park has always served as an elite facility for rowing, dragon boating, canoeing and kayaking, Taaffe sees great potential in other uses.

"I see this as a diamond in the rough," he says. "We have 600 acres here, and we can do so many things we had never thought we could do before."

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Sarasota County commissioners recently voted to help fund the construction of a 100,000-square-foot inside sports facility to top the planned boathouse for the park.

We spoke with Taafe recently about some of his thoughts for the future.

*People love coming here for the biking and running trails. What plans do you have for them?*

We're going to expand them. There are two types of trails: asphalt trails for biking and running and cinder trails for running and walking. We're going to expand the cinder trails around the southern end of the park to add an additional 2 miles to the already existing trails, which is about 3.1 miles.

*Playgrounds are also popular here; do you have plans for creating more?*

Absolutely. I'd like to see two playgrounds, one designed for younger children and one for older children, with the appropriate recreational equipment for both. Both will be under shade. We also want to have a food truck and a coffee truck so that the adults watching their children can get a cup of coffee or a sandwich. Eventually, we may add a small concession area with coffee, sandwiches and juices.

*What about plans for a pavilion?*

At the 500-meter mark (of the lake), we're going to install a cement surface with a large solid covering so that people can practice yoga and work out under shade. During the weekends, if there's an event, this can also serve as another shaded viewing area.

*What can you tell us about adding a boathouse to the park?*

The boathouse is essential because we need a permanent facility to run community events and have a long-term presence for people who want to use the park daily or for events. I don't want to get ahead of this, but it's going to be great if it happens.

*The anticipated I-75 overpass connecting the University Town Center area and Waterside Place of Lakewood Ranch could break ground in 2023 if funding is in place. What impact do you think the overpass is going to have on the park?*

It's going to open the park up directly

to Lakewood Ranch without having to go through the University (Parkway) interchange. The flyover is going to have wide multiuse lanes for running and biking, so that will give us access to Lakewood Ranch and Lakewood Ranch access to us to stage larger biking and running events.

By having the additional distance, we can host half and full marathons and Ironman triathlons because we have all the roadways and the Celery Fields. We'll have access to run more long-distance events that will start in the park and finish in the park but circle through Lakewood Ranch.

*What do you think will be the biggest revenue generators with all the new improvements that you're planning?*

The events that bring teams from around the world and nation — those that stay for a week or two at local

hotels and eat at local restaurants — will continue to bring vital revenue to the area. But that will not overshadow the day-to-day community events that happen here. It's a symbiotic relationship between events that generate revenue and programs that benefit the community.

*How does it feel to be in the planning process of what's to come?*

It's exciting. I've always known the potential of rowing and how it changes people's lives — and the life of the community around it. And now, to see people out here every day running, biking, walking — it's also wonderful to know that Benderson has become an important and welcoming destination for our surrounding community. The park is quickly becoming the center of our community and the biggest active public park in the area.

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*The park is quickly becoming the center of our community and the biggest active public park in the area.”* MICHAEL TAAFFE



People flock to Nathan Benderson Park for various events throughout the year.