Forest Park will get big donation

By JAKE WAGMAN
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As a boy growing up in University City, Jack C. Taylor loved to explore Forest Park -- navigating the lake with his father in the summer, sledding down snowy Art Hill in the winter.

Today, Taylor will return to the park as the billionaire founder of Enterprise Rent-A-Car, poised to give some of his considerable wealth to make sure generations of St. Louis children enjoy the park as he did. The rental car king is expected to announce this morning a $5 million donation for the preservation of the city's crown jewel.

The contribution will be the largest by an individual to Forest Park Forever, the private group whose massive fundraising campaign has been credited with reversing years of neglect at the park.

"We are just overwhelmed by his generosity," said Jim Mann, executive director of Forest Park Forever.

The gift comes at a key time for the park. Forest Park has blossomed into one of the nation's top city parks -- the next challenge becomes how to keep it that way. As Mann puts it, that's "the 'forever' phase of Forest Park Forever."

During the restoration effort, Taylor and his family were some of the park's kindest benefactors. The Taylors donated more than $2 million to pay for the construction of a new boathouse that opened in 2003. Though the wooden electric boats that Taylor rode with his father have long been replaced, the memories remain for Taylor.

"I have very fond memories of those days with my father, who I was crazy about," Taylor, 83, said in a brief interview.

Of course, Forest Park is not the only recipient of Taylor's philanthropy, nor the one that has even benefited the most. In 2000, Taylor's $40 million "challenge" grant helped save the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra from the brink of insolvency.

Taylor recently discussed his gift to the park with Mann over lunch, fittingly, at the boathouse Taylor paid to build. The one sign of that donation is a plaque over the fireplace in memory of Taylor's parents, Mel and Dorothy.

Taylor's latest gift, to be announced in a ceremony at the park's visitor center, will bring the Forest Park Forever endowment to $12 million.
That financial cushion does not ease all of the park's money concerns. The $94 million push to restore Forest Park that began almost a decade ago brought back to life landmarks such as the Jewel Box and the World's Fair Pavilion. Now, park boosters are looking to fulfill the lower-profile task of finding a sustained stream of cash to maintain the park's pristine condition.

St. Louis city officials have agreed to put $1.5 million a year toward the park, Mann says, but the city also is caretaker for more than 100 other parks. Keeping Forest Park as polished as it is now will require $3.5 million more a year. Taylor's gift is a step in the right direction, Mann says, but Forest Park still needs more help.

"We want to make sure it's the premier urban park in the country," Mann said.
St. Louis family donates $5 million to preserve and maintain Forest Park

By CHERYL WITTENAUER

ST. LOUIS - Enterprise Rent-A-Car founder Jack Taylor has contributed to a pricey, 10-year renovation of the city's jewel, the 1,370-acre Forest Park, over the last few years.

But then he began to worry that the park's $94 million makeover would deteriorate without sufficient funds to preserve its grandeur.

Taylor, a billionaire, and his family - who have made several notable gifts to St. Louis institutions, including the Saint Louis Symphony and Missouri Botanical Gardens - addressed that Monday by donating $5 million to a maintenance endowment of Forest Park Forever. The private, nonprofit group works with the City of St. Louis to restore and preserve Forest Park.

He challenged others in the community to hand over "any loose money" they might have to help maintain the park's glory.

Mayor Francis Slay called the Taylor family donation an "outstanding, wonderful, generous gift," which, like their earlier ones, "come from the heart because they're made to institutions that enrich our lives."

Forest Park, which was host of the 1904 World's Fair, is one of the nation's premiere urban parks, drawing 12 million visitors a year to its art, science and history museums, municipal opera, zoo, biking and hiking trails, golf course, tennis courts and other attractions.

Its 1,370 acres are hundreds of acres larger than New York's famed Central Park.

A $94 million makeover from 1997 to 2003 renewed the park's waterways, reworked its roads and exercise paths, revamped its golf course and retooled a 19th-century train station into a visitors' center.

Sewer lines were ripped up and replaced, a new boathouse was built and the park's centerpiece - the lake area known as the Grand Basin, in front of the art museum - was restored and adorned with new fountains.

The World's Fair Pavilion was updated, as was its art deco floral conservatory known as the Jewel Box.

A study commissioned by Forest Park Forever and the city estimates that at least $4.5 million is needed each year to maintain the park's formal gardens and natural landscapes, historic structures, recreational facilities, waterways and path systems, wildlife habitats and nearly 18,000 trees, some more than 200 years old.
The city contributes $1.5 million to maintain the park each year, leaving a $3 million annual gap Forest Park Forever is trying to close with private donations. The Taylor gift should provide annual support of roughly $250,000 in perpetuity.

Forest Park Forever president James Mann said the organization's donor list has doubled over the past few years to 10,000.

Previously, the Taylors had donated $3 million to Forest Park Forever projects, including the design and construction of the boathouse in Forest Park.
On a stifling hot July Monday, Jo Ann Taylor Kindle was thinking about when she was a little girl and the time her father took her sledding on the steep hill northwest of the Art Museum in Forest Park, a spot that generations of St. Louis children have called "Suicide Hill."

Jack C. Taylor, who was then building the largest car rental company in North America, was apparently unaware of certain properties of the particular vehicle he gave his daughter to use as a sled: a cookie sheet. By the time the makeshift lane stopped sliding, young Jo Ann was almost in the middle of Skinker Boulevard.

"Forest Park forms the backdrop of our lives," said Ms. Kindle. The people at Forest Park Forever are accustomed to hearing happy stories like that one, vivid memories of family and fun in the park. What they are not used to — no one is, because it's never happened before, anywhere — is someone giving $5 million to maintain the park, no strings attached. Not even New York's Central Park has gotten such a gift. Yet that's just what Jack Taylor and his family and his company, Enterprise Rent-A-Car, have done this week.

During the original Forest Park Forever fund-raising drive, the Taylor family underwrote the $2 million facelift to Post-Dispatch Lake and construction of the wonderful new boathouse, now one of the park's premier attractions. This time, instead of underwriting a new building or facility, Mr. Taylor asked that the funds go into the park's maintenance-endowment fund. There it will generate about $250,000 a year in interest that will help preserve the park in all of its restored glory.

Forest Park Forever, the public-private partnership that spent $94 million restoring the park over the past eight years, estimates maintenance costs at $4.5 million a year. The city of St. Louis provides about one-third of that. The rest comes from the endowment and other gifts.

The Taylor gift raises the park's endowment fund to $12 million. Bankers recommend no more than a 5 percent draw per year from an endowment, so it will take an endowment of $60 million a year to close the $3 million maintenance gap. Forest Park Forever hopes that the Taylors' gift will inspire other large gifts just as the Taylors' $40 million challenge grant to the St. Louis Symphony spawned other gifts to the orchestra.

At ceremonies Monday at the park's Dennis and Judith Jones Visitors and Education Center, Mayor Francis Slay said the Taylors "care about the institutions that enrich our lives." That's putting it mildly. In recent years, the Taylor family has given $25 million to Washington University, $30 million to the Missouri Botanical Garden, $6 million to the Zoo and numerous other gifts worth millions more.

Calling the park "our common treasure," Ms. Kindle urged all St. Louisans, regardless of their means, to volunteer time, money or a combination of the two to preserve it. Nicely put. Forest Park is our common treasure, and the Taylor family is our uncommon one.
GIFT OF THE WEEK

Park Service

WHO GAVE IT: Jack Taylor, founder of Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Clayton, Mo., his wife, Susan, son and daughter.

WHO GOT IT: Forest Park Forever, St. Louis.

HOW MUCH: $5 million.

BY REQUEST: The gift will go into an endowment that supports the maintenance of the 1,370-acre Forest Park, in St. Louis.

YOUR NAME HERE: There will be no naming.

HOW IT HAPPENED: Mr. Taylor, 83, grew up within a mile of Forest Park, where his father took him boating as a child. The 129-year-old park was the site of the 1904 World’s Fair and now houses history, science and art museums, a golf course, zoo and plant conservatory. After falling into disrepair in the 1960s and 1970s, the park underwent a six-year, $94 million renovation that was completed last year. As part of the restoration, Mr. Taylor donated $2 million for a new boathouse. He recently heard that park administrators were trying to raise money for maintenance—the park costs $4.5 million a year to maintain, but the city only covers $1.5 million—and made this donation. This is the largest gift to the park’s $12 million endowment. It will generate about $250,000 a year for the park in perpetuity.

—E.B.