

Prospect Meadows takes another step forward

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Proponents of a state-the-art, \$9.4 million baseball and softball complex north of Marion appeared to hit a home run Wednesday with the Linn County Board of Supervisors.

The proposed 17-field facility would be located on 120 acres of county-owned farm land just south of the Abbe Center at the intersection of Highway 13 and County Home Road.

The local non-profit group pitching the project is asking the supervisors to donate the land, and board members indicated they are likely to buy into the plan.

Board Member Linda Langston said a decision will be made by the end of August, when the contract ends with the farmer now renting the land.

After a presentation Wednesday morning on the design and a positive feasibility study, however, it was clear board members are excited about the Prospect Meadows Ball Fields proposal.

"I can see that this has real economic development and quality of life benefits," said Board President Ben Rogers, "for Linn county and for the state to have something like this in our own backyard."

Fellow Supervisor Lu Barron agreed.

"It's just a great use for this property."

Former Cedar Rapids Kernels General Manager Jack Roeder, who is serving as a volunteer

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point man for the project, said the diamonds would serve the need for more playing fields for local softball and baseball players of all ages, youth through adult. And he said the facility would host large tournaments, attracting both participants and fans within driving distance from all over the Midwest.

Roeder said estimates are that 120,000 visitors a year would be involved in tournaments, requiring 80,000 hotel rooms and other amenities. He put the direct economic impact on the area at \$25 million annually with a target date for completion is 2013.

Also, Langston pointed out that the complex would likely spur other development in the area.

In addition, the non-profit operation would use revenues to fund local charitable groups.

Roeder said eight of the diamonds would have grass infields and regulation dimensions, while eight others with dirt infields could be configured for use from t-ball to adult softball. Half the diamonds would be lighted. Also in the plans are a "Miracle Diamond" for those with disabilities.

Favorable discussions have been held with a host of local organizations, Roeder said, from agencies like Camp Courageous that serve the disabled to the Perfect Game organization that stages major baseball tournaments throughout the country.

In addition, a feasibility study funded with a \$20,000 grant from the Board of Supervisors showed overwhelming support for both the project and its proposed location. A \$4.2 million fund drive is anticipated to help fund construction.

But Marion businessman Richard Bice, one of the early organizers, said a key element is obtaining the land donation (valued at around \$1 million) from the county.

"If we have control of the land, we can apply for a number of state and federal grants," Bice said.

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Besides the fields themselves, the design calls for a two-acre lake for both run-off and irrigation purposes, a wetlands area, walking trails, public gardens and a large playground area.

“We’re really looking at a family-friendly environment,” Roeder said. “And it will be first-rate facility. Everyone we talked to about it has found it very appealing from a number of aspects.”