

New field, new dreams for Lions

Written by Mike Deupree

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When planners of a sweeping update of Linn-Mar High School's athletics complex took the first steps in that process, the athletes who will be using those facilities had not yet taken theirs. Some of them were not even born.

"I was the principal for 12 years and this project has been on the table for at least 15 years," said Jerry Van Dyke, who has remained closely involved with the high school in retirement as the coordinator/adviser on the project, which will be ready for use this Spring.

The need for action was obvious, especially during the rainy season. Venerable Armstrong Field, home to the Lions for half a century, is in the Indian Creek flood plain. As more and more land was developed, more and more water ended up where it shouldn't have been.

"We have had six feet of flood water running northeast to southwest across the field on several occasions," said Van Dyke.

The flooding made the field unusable and resulted in expensive cleaning and repair work. Perhaps worse, it deterred administrators from making improvements that became necessary as the existing facilities aged and the school, along with its athletics programs, grew. It just didn't make sense to spend a lot of money on something that was likely to be under water sooner or later, probably sooner.

But building an entirely new complex took a lot of planning, and it was necessary to come up with a lot of money. Numerous feasibility studies and site surveys took care of the former, while voters made the latter possible by authorizing a local option sales tax to fund school facilities.

Fifteen years is a long time, but from all indications, the result is going to be worth the wait.

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The centerpiece of the \$8.5 million project is a stadium built to serve football, soccer, track, physical education and marching band. It will have an all-weather surface, as will the accompanying track, which features eight 42-inch lanes. Everything is intended to be state-of-the-art, from the Musco lighting to a scoreboard with large video display.

The seating on the visitor (East) side will accommodate 1,000 fans. That's the same as at Armstrong Field, but the new place will have seating for 5,000 on the home side compared to 2,000 at Armstrong. It is space that's badly needed.

"We estimate we would have had capacity crowds at least twice during the 2010 football campaign," said Van Dyke. Not surprising, considering Linn-Mar's history of winning football and the energy generated by the team's 7-0 start in an 8-3 season this year.

Seating on the home side will be in an upper and lower tier, with a concourse separating the two. When fans enter, students will go down to their seats while non-students will go up, allowing students to stand if they wish without prompting yells of "down in front!" from their parents.

Restrooms and concession stands will be located on both sides and in a multi-purpose building at the North end, which also will be home to locker rooms for the visiting team and the officials, storage and an office for event coordinators.

All those fans need a place to park their cars, another longstanding problem the new facilities will ease considerably. The new stadium is located on North 10th street in Marion between the high school and Excelsior Middle School, which makes the existing high school parking space easily usable, while the 500 additional parking spots that are part of the new project will alleviate crowding in the school lot during the day.

Originally planners hoped to play at least part of the 2010 football season at the new field; the inevitable construction delays moved the completion date back a few months, and it is now expected to be ready for the track and field season.

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What of Armstrong Field? It will continue to serve the school and community, but in ways that aren't dependent upon staying dry, perhaps eventually as a location for P.E. practice fields. Named to honor Dr. William Armstrong, longtime volunteer physician to Lion teams who was killed in an airplane accident in 1970, the field is one not only of dreams but of memories, a place where great players and great teams performed.

In a few months those athletes who weren't born when the planning for its successor began will have a chance to start creating new dreams and new memories.

The general contractor on the project, Knutson Construction Services, has had a camera with time-lapse capability on the site from the start. Check it out at: http://www.knutsonconstruction.com/projects/web_cams/linn-mar_high_school_stadium/