

Mount Mercy delays verdict on football

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 25 February 2016 19:02 - Last Updated Thursday, 25 February 2016 19:07



Mount Mercy University has postponed its decision about starting a varsity football program for another year as it continues to study the costs, fundraising plans and future impact on the school.

The Board of Trustees has endorsed the concept of having a football team for the 2019 season, but the board decided at its annual meeting this month in Florida that there are too many unanswered questions at this point.

Where would the players live? How much money could be raised to finance the program? What impact would another 100 students have on academic classes?

"Significant financial decisions remain which will require board approval," Mount Mercy president Laurie Hamen informed Mount Mercy employees in a Feb. 17 e-mail that was obtained by the Metro Sports Report.

Hamen said in December that she expected a final decision on football during the early part of 2016, but now that time frame has been extended for another full year.

Bob Callahan, the Mount Mercy vice president for enrollment and student services, declined to put a ballpark figure on the costs, but there's no doubt it would require several million dollars to begin a new team for equipment, a coaching staff, a support staff, uniforms, travel and other costs.

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"It's quite expensive," Callahan told the Metro Sports Report on Thursday. "It's significant."

Housing is a major concern, because the current residence halls are "pretty full," according to Callahan. Classrooms are nearly filled to capacity as well as record enrollment has pushed the number of students at Mount Mercy to nearly 1,900.

"If we added football tomorrow, we wouldn't have a place to house them and to educate them," he said. "So we have to make sure that financially we're going to be able to satisfy those growing needs if we were to add that football program."

Mount Mercy University was admitted to the Heart of America Conference last year following the demise of the Midwest Collegiate Conference, but the Heart of America currently requires all its members to have a varsity football team. The Heart of America gave Mount Mercy a waiver to field a team by the 2018 season, but now the university has asked the conference to extend the waiver another year to 2019.

There's a possibility the Heart of America could evict Mount Mercy from the league if it does not start football in time, but it's also possible the Heart of America would grant the waiver or drop the requirement to have football from its by-laws.

"We're hoping they're going to give us that one-year waiver," Callahan said.

Mount Mercy University plans to study the football issues through the end of 2016 and make another presentation to the Board of Trustees next February.

Callahan said the average number of football players on NAIA teams this past season was 101.

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He said Mount Mercy has used that number in calculating costs, but also has used lower and higher numbers in other calculations.

In terms of housing, Callahan said Mount Mercy would consider the possibility of building another dormitory and also would look at the possibility of other arrangements, such as buying an apartment complex near campus if a facility is available.

"We're going to leave no stone unturned to try and find how this could work," he remarked.

Under current rules, all incoming freshmen at Mount Mercy are required to live in dormitories for their first two years in school. If Mount Mercy decides to implement a football program, the Mustangs undoubtedly would have a heavy influx of college transfer students as part of their initial squad as they begin a team from scratch.

In other matters, the Board of Trustees approved the solicitation of bids for a new athletic complex with the intention to begin construction this spring or summer. Callahan said Mount Mercy still has not reached the fundraising goal of \$15 million for the Plaster Athletic Complex, but said the project will proceed as planned.

President Hamen said in December that the school had raised approximately \$12 million for the project. Callahan said the school has raised additional money since then, but has more work to do.

"If everything keeps going as planned, we should be in the ground sometime this spring or early summer at the latest," he said.

Callahan said the playing surface for the field at the new stadium will be lined for soccer, football and lacrosse and would have football goal

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posts. Even if Mount Mercy does not start a football program, Callahan said Mount Mercy wants to have a football facility that could be used by high schools and community groups.

Callahan described lacrosse as a growing sport that could be added at Mount Mercy in the future.

"At some point we're going to look at lacrosse as an option here too," he said. "We are beginning to think along those lines."