

Village presses league for project deadline

Written by Steve Ostermann
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Trustees ask Grafton Little League to decide if plan for stalled \$2.5 million facility is financially feasible

Concerned about the future of a \$2.5 million playing facility the Grafton Little League wants to build, the Grafton Village Board has asked league officials to decide if the project is financially feasible.

With a Sept. 1 deadline for the start of construction looming and no ground-breaking plans scheduled, board members decided Monday that the league's lease agreement to use village land should be amended if the project is still viable.

"How long does it just sit there?" Trustee Ron La Pean asked of a vacant 40-acre parcel the league proposed using for the facility at the northeast corner of Lakefield and River Bend roads.

"At some point, doesn't the land turn back to the village for something else?"

Last year, the league signed a 30-year lease that paved the way for construction of a state-of-the-art playing complex that would have four lighted ball diamonds, two practice fields, indoor and outdoor batting cages, a restrooms/concessions building, playground and parking for nearly 300 vehicles.

The lease gives the league until Sept. 1 to begin work, but League President Mark Koehler said the project has stalled due to fund-raising problems.

"It's a bad time to be looking for money," Koehler told the board. "A lot of companies are not giving money like they have in the past."

Koehler said league officials have approached a number of prospective corporate sponsors but have only raised about \$30,000. That total, he said, includes league funds and \$20,000 in donations.

"We have pledges for three times that, but most companies say they will give time and materials instead of money," Koehler added. "A lot of them are shocked at the price tag."

"We need hard money to come in to proceed."

The league complex is planned for the west side of a village-owned parcel, the east side of which the village is using for yard-waste collection and other public works operations.

In obtaining village approval of the project, league officials cited a shortage of baseball fields in Grafton and an increased need for youth leagues. Last year, the league had more than 400 children on more than 30 teams.

Plans call for the project to be developed in phases, starting with the four game fields. Koehler said first-phase construction would likely spark more interest from sponsors and donors but

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could cost \$500,000 to \$750,000.

“Once people see some work actually being done out there, it would probably encourage them to contribute,” he added.

The \$2.5 million cost could also be pared considerably, Koehler said, through donations of materials and labor.

Koehler said the league didn't plan to hold any major community fund-raising activities until it obtained major sponsorships. “We believe community fund-raisers should be something that fills in costs after we have major contributions,” he added.

Village President Jim Brunnuell said he appreciates the difficult challenge the league is facing and voiced support for the project, which he said should be given more time.

“We've been through these things before,” Brunnuell said. “I don't think we're at the point of pulling the plug on a great project like this. We have to give it a chance.”

La Pean said he also backs the project but wants a firm deadline included in the lease agreement. “Let's extend it by six months, one year or whatever, but let's stick to it,” he said.

Village Administrator Darrell Hofland recommended having the league propose a lease amendment.

Koehler said Tuesday the league was asked to present a proposed lease amendment at the next Village Board meeting Tuesday, Sept. 7.

“We will meet as a group and decide what we can work with,” he said. “We'll have to look at sponsorship opportunities and how much we need to raise to get things going.

“We have to buy enough times to raise the money, but we also have to ask how much longer we can wait before deciding the project isn't going to continue.”

Last year, the project site became overgrown with weeds, prompting the village to notify the league that it needed to maintain the project site. In response, the league allowed a local resident to farm the land at no cost this spring, with plowing controlling the weeds, Koehler said.

Information on the proposed playing facility, including depictions of the completed complex, is available at www.graftonlittleleague.com.