Written by Steve Ostermann
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Organization leaders say shortage of pledges could jeopardize start of work on $2 million facility

Members of the Grafton Little League remain optimistic that their plans to build a $2 million playing facility will become a reality in the near future.

However, league officials are also voicing concern about the future of the project because of fund-raising problems.

“We’re kind of at a critical stage with the project,” League President Mark Koehler said.

“We’ve had a number of fund-raising activities, including one at the end of October, but we haven’t gotten the response we hoped for.”

Last May, the league signed a 30-year lease with the Village of Grafton that paved the way for the construction of a state-of-the-art playing complex at the northeast corner of Lakefield and River Bend roads.

Plans call for the complex to 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 complex is earmarked for the west side of a 40-acre parcel, the east side of which the village will use for yard-waste collection and other public works operations.

League officials said the project will be completely paid for through private donations and fund-raising activities. Although a ground-breaking ceremony was expected to be held last summer, it has been tabled due to the funding shortfall, they said.

“We set Dec. 15 as the deadline for major donors to make commitments, but a lot of companies said we should come back after the first of the year,” Koehler said.

“We’ve got a lot of irons in the fire, but we haven’t gotten any major commitments.”

In seeking village approval of the project last year, league officials cited a shortage of baseball fields in Grafton and a growing need for youth leagues. The league registered about 400 children on more than 30 teams for the 2009 season, which ran from April to August.

League officials said they hope to develop the project in several phases, starting with construction of the four game fields. If the first phase can begin by spring, the fields could still be ready for use in 2011, which was the original plan, Koehler said.

“But we still need a good chunk of money before we can start any work,” Koehler said.

The league hopes to defray the $2 million cost through donations of materials and labor that could reduce the final cost considerably, Koehler added.

A more precise cost estimate will be determined through bids, which league officials hope to secure by early 2010 if fund-raising efforts pay off. Those efforts are expected to include selling naming rights for the complex, fields, building and other facilities as well as outfield signs.

“We’d like to bid the project out all at once,” Koehler said. “With the economy the way it is, it should be a good time for bids, but we need pledges before we can go out and secure a loan.”

The league has received several thousand dollars in contributions, including $10,000 gift from the Town of Grafton’s parks and open space fund.

The league has secured nearly all necessary approvals from the village for the project except architectural plans for the restrooms/concessions building. The Architectural Review Board is scheduled to consider that portion of the project in January.

Terms of the lease with the village give the league use of the site for 30 years for $1 per year. However, the league is required to start construction by Sept. 1, 2010, and must construct a berm or barrier between the complex and the yard-waste collection site.

In approving a site plan for the fields last year, village officials voiced support for the project, which they said would be a welcome addition to the community.

“From day one, there has been a partnership with the league, and the village has been very supportive of their efforts,” Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said.

“I would recommend that the Village Board continue to work with the Grafton Little League to make the project a reality.”

Koehler said he’s hoping local businesses, organizations and residents will recognize the importance of the project and step forward to contribute.

“It’s not just about the Grafton Little League wanting to do something. It’s a far-reaching communitywide program that affects 400 kids,” he said.

More information on the project, including a 3-D aerial depiction of the completed complex, is available on the Web site www.graftonlittleleague.com.