

Little League resurrects fields project

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Group secures 30-year lease with village to try again with plan dropped in 2011 due to fundraising problems

Two years after dropping plans to build a state-of-the-art baseball/softball complex, the Grafton Little League is ready to try again.

The Grafton Village Board on Monday unanimously approved the league's request for a 30-year lease to construct the project, which would include four lighted playing fields and other facilities on 20 acres at the northeast corner of Lakefield and River Bend roads.

The lease gives the league use of the land until Sept. 1, 2043, for \$1 per year. Under the agreement, the league is required to begin constructing the playing fields and a restrooms/concession stand by Sept. 1, 2018, or the village has the right to terminate the lease.

In negotiating with the village, league officials proposed a complex that would also include an indoor practice facility, playground, equipment sheds, picnic area, parking lot and other amenities built in six yearly phases. Those facilities were included in a plan the league unveiled in 2009 but abandoned in October 2011 after failing to raise enough money to begin construction.

League President Jerry Faust said league officials are more optimistic this time around. He cited greater potential for fundraising and a longer time frame to complete the project as factors.

"The economy has changed, and we're not trying to do it all at once," Faust said.

"The more time the better, and the better the complex will be."

Faust said project phases are in preliminary stages, with fundraising and construction details yet to be worked out.

"It's so early. The architects did an awesome job with the facilities that were proposed, and we would love to do that, but we have to see what we can do," he said.

As they did in 2009, league officials said the complex is needed to meet a growing demand for youth baseball/softball facilities in Grafton. The league currently leases playing fields from the Grafton School District and shares them with other groups, including school softball and baseball teams.

Faust said the league has nearly 350 boys and girls, ages 6 to 14, on 25 teams and plans to offer a T-ball program next year that will increase participation numbers.

League Treasurer Mike Donahue said the new facilities are overdue. "We feel that having a newer complex with multiple fields would ease the strain put on the current fields," he said.

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The project site is on the west side of a village-owned parcel, the east side of which is used for yard-waste collection and other public works operations. Part of the project site is currently used for a community garden, but Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said the garden would be relocated once the league begins construction.

Hofland said village officials welcomed the league's new plan.

"It will be a great community amenity for Grafton youth," he said. "By changing the timetable to six years, the financial bite is more palatable."

The league's 2009 plans estimated the total project cost at \$2.5 million. However, Faust said league officials will be revisiting all costs and focus on yearly construction phases.

"At this point, we're just excited about the chance to work with the village," Faust said.

The league reported having \$105,000 in its budget and a project fund. Donahue said league officials are upbeat about launching a successful fundraising campaign.

"There are some potential developments in the works," he said. "We're hoping to be able to establish some partnerships that will help make this work."