

Prospect Meadows getting lease for ball fields

Written by Tom Fruehling
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An agreement has been reached for planners of the Prospect Meadows Ball Fields to sign a long-term lease for 121 acres of county-owned land north of Marion.

A public hearing drew no objections Monday morning, and the Linn County Board of Supervisors will formally approve the lease at its meeting on Wednesday.

The lease calls for the non-profit Prospect Meadows group to lease the land for \$1 a year for 20 years, followed by three renewal options every 25 years for a total of 95 years.

"Finalizing this long-term lease is a critical step in making this project a reality," said Jack Roeder, former general manager of the Cedar Rapids Kernels and president of Prospect Meadows Ball Fields, Inc. "We can now come up with a realistic timeline. And it allows our fundraising to move forward.

"We appreciate the strong support we have received from the Board of Supervisors for this facility."

Plans call for construction of 17 baseball and softball diamonds on farm land just south of County Home Road and east of Highway 13. The property for many years has been rented out by the county for pasture land.

The complex is intended to be used by local teams and for tournaments to attract out-of-town visitors. One of the diamonds will be designated as a Miracle Field built for people with disabilities.

When first proposed last summer, it was hoped that construction could begin this summer with completion in 2013. Roeder said he is unsure if that schedule can now be met.

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At an estimated cost of \$9.4 million, funding for the project is expected to come from state and local grants, private and corporate donations and in-kind contributions. Roeder said fundraising will now begin in earnest with the land lease in place.

"This project really has an impact in multiple ways for the area," Roeder said. "The Miracle Field will allow people with disabilities to experience our national pastime in a complex with everyone else.

"We'll have programs for at-risk youth who can't normally afford to play the game. Our local leagues will have more, much-needed space to play. And, with our affiliation with Perfect Game, we'll attract tournaments from around the country, creating a tremendous economic impact here."

Perfect Game USA is a Cedar Rapids baseball company that runs tournaments and showcases throughout the country, as well as offering instruction at its facility on the southwest side of town.

Roeder said projections are that 60,000 visitors will come to the area each year and generate \$25 million in direct spending.

As an example of the popularity of such complexes in other parts of the country, Roeder told the Board of Supervisors Monday of a planned 12-day tournament in the Omaha/Council Bluffs area this summer that is expected to draw 500 teams from 40 states. The event is expected to pump \$13 million into the local economy.

Local officials have said that the complex north of Marion will likely result in other development to accommodate those who use the facilities.

"There's been a great deal of enthusiasm for this project," Roeder noted. "We're now ready to put a strategic plan in place."

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The Prospect Meadows group originally wanted the county to give them the land, but the Board of Supervisors preferred a long-term lease.