

If you've ever wondered how Prospect Meadows got started, just ask Rick Freese.

It was his idea.

Freese had a chance to see some of the top baseball complexes in the country when he traveled to special events with his grandson, Dakota Freese, when Dakota was a promising young player in Cedar Rapids. Rick began asking himself a simple question: Why can't we have a major complex like these in Linn County for our kids?

The idea began to take shape roughly 13 years ago - he thinks it was about 2006 - and that got him started.

"The light started coming on," he said last week.

The lights will begin shining at Prospect Meadows for real in three short months when the new facility opens its doors to the public. The opening ceremony is scheduled for May 23 at the new facility, located at the juncture of Highway 13 and County Home Road north of Marion.

It's been approximately 13 years from conception to reality. Freese smiles at the notion that opening day is nearly here.

"We've all put so much hard time into it," he said. "I guess somebody needs to pinch me yet."

Prospect Meadows will open this spring with eight regulation baseball fields and a Miracle Field

for kids with disabilities. The plan is to add eight more smaller fields in a few years, suitable for younger age groups in baseball and softball.

Freese, 68, owns Rick Freese Well Drilling in southeast Cedar Rapids and has 50 years of experience in the business. He knew the importance of finding relatively flat land that had a suitable water supply for a massive complex like this.

Jerry Ford, the president of Perfect Game USA, was an early supporter of the project. Jack Roeder, the former general manager of the Cedar Rapids Kernels, was hired as the GM for Prospect Meadows in 2010. An outstanding group of people joined the Board of Directors and Freese's original idea began to take shape.

"The doors started opening up," said Freese, who serves as secretary of the board.

Perfect Game will be a primary tenant at Prospect Meadows to stage a variety of events, bringing a multiple of teams and thousands of people to the community each year.

Freese quickly spreads credit for what's happening at Prospect Meadows, but he cannot say enough good things about Roeder, who was heavily involved with planning the new Veterans Memorial Stadium before retiring from the Kernels after the 2010 season.

"Jack didn't get a chance to drink his coffee after he retired," quipped Freese, alluding to Roeder's penchant for his "vitamin" of choice.

"Jack has been a great asset to the whole project," he said. "He's relentless at work. Many times, you go by the place out there on Saturday and Sunday and he's still there at 5 o'clock at night. He's still working."

Transamerica and the Hall-Perrine Foundation lent their generous support to the project, among many other companies and organizations. The City of Marion got on board, and the

Linn County Board of Supervisors provided a 95-year lease for 128 acres of land. The City of Cedar Rapids is also supporting the project.

Major grants of public money were attained. A private fundraising campaign has been undertaken and continues to this day. More and more good people got involved.

And now Opening Day is only three months away. Freese was always confident they would reach this point and provide new opportunities for thousands of young ballplayers. Now it's nearly here.

"Failure never crossed my mind," he said. "It wasn't an option."