

\$60 million sports complex proposed for city's south side

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A sports center that would include a 3,000-seat baseball stadium, soccer fields and a football/track facility is being proposed for the south side of Springfield.

Still in the preliminary stages of planning, and with many financial hurdles to overcome, the complex would be built near Interstate 72 and Second Street on land owned by Calvary Temple. Calvary has agreed to donate the property, about 123 acres, if the complex is built.

The complex, which is being called STAR (Springfield Training & Athletic Recreational) Center, could either replace or supplement Robin Roberts Stadium (Lanphier Park) for baseball and Memorial Stadium for football, both of which are aging and in need of renovation.

Originally, Calvary planned to build its own sports facilities at the site, which it bought after the Xanadu sports project fell apart about 10 years ago. But now the church would rather help get something built there for the entire community, especially Springfield's youth.

"We don't have to own a sports complex for it to be a blessing to the community," said Dan Shryock, director of worship arts at Calvary. "We ended up buying more land than we originally intended. We have an opportunity to give something back to the community because of the way it all worked out. It's a fortuitous thing."

Calvary, 1730 W. Jefferson St., still plans to build a new church, school and facilities for its ministries on the land it owns east of Second Street.

An experienced planner

In August, Calvary hired Mike Thiessen of The Madison Group, a company based in Western Springs, a Chicago suburb. Thiessen has experience in helping communities develop baseball stadiums and was hired to bring this project together in Springfield.

Since then, Thiessen has been soliciting support from governmental officials, labor organizations and youth and adult sports organizations in anticipation of formally unveiling project details on or about June 1. Thiessen said he has firm commitments for using the proposed complex from most of the organizations he has discussed the idea with, including youth and adult sports associations.

"Every meeting we've had, we've been welcome and enthusiastically supported to take the next step as we get down to the details with everybody's involvement," said Thiessen.

In addition to the main stadium, STAR Center would have six other baseball fields (three natural turf and three artificial), seven soccer fields (four natural and three artificial), a football stadium surrounded by a track, an indoor sports facility and parking for 3,000 vehicles.

Price tag? \$60 million

Thiessen said the estimated \$60 million needed for construction could come from a variety of sources, including grant money. The project has been designed so it can be built in three phases if necessary as money becomes available. Once it's up and running, Thiessen said, it will bring in revenue.

"The rental fees, admission costs, donations, corporate sponsorship, all of those things will help," Thiessen said. "We don't want the place to be an annual drag on the budget. That's one of the things we're taking into account. That's always very important when planning something like this."

Crucial to development of the complex is the planned extension of Lincolnshire Boulevard from MacArthur Boulevard to Sixth Street. It would provide access to the sports center from the north, over railroad tracks that currently bar access. The extension, estimated to cost \$16 million, would need to be accelerated as part of a capital projects bill for Illinois, possibly using federal economic stimulus money.

State Sen. Larry Bomke and Rep. Raymond Poe, both R-Springfield, met with Thiessen about the proposal in recent months. Bomke said he's supportive, but getting money included in the state capital bill may be difficult.

"There are so many needs from different communities because we haven't done a capital bill for nine years," he said. "Probably our attention first would be given to those communities for sewer, water, maybe some road needs."

Poe also said finding funding could ultimately depend on how big the capital bill ends up being and whether the Illinois Department of Transportation gets involved.

City, others interested

Jim Donelan, executive assistant to Mayor Tim Davlin, said it is too early to say what role the city might play in the project.

"As far as us being interested in having a seat at the table, we absolutely are," Donelan said. "It's one that we're anxious to see develop."

The Springfield School District and the University of Illinois at Springfield are considering using the complex in some fashion for their sports teams. The baseball stadium could be a possible site for UIS when it creates a baseball team as part of the school's upcoming transition to NCAA Division II athletics.

"We're going to need a place to play baseball," said UIS Chancellor Richard Ringeisen. "From the way it's described, it would be much nicer than what we could afford to build on campus. It could be a beautiful home stadium for us."

Dave Smith, director of operations and maintenance for the Springfield public schools, said it's too early to know how the school district would use the facilities. But he said something could probably be worked out if the STAR Center becomes a reality.

"We don't have any money to contribute on the front end," Smith said, "But maybe we could do some kind of lease agreement with them. Superintendent (Walter) Milton and everybody here is behind supporting the effort. As time progresses, we'll have a better idea of how we could use that facility."

Smith said money has been spent getting Memorial Stadium's field and track in shape, and he thinks that is working out well for the district.

Job, tourism generator

Brad Schaive, business manager of Laborers Local 477, said there is wide consensus that the sports center is needed for Springfield. The construction jobs would be welcome for his union members, he said.

"I'm sold on the project," Schaive said. "One of the things that will be the deciding factor is the infrastructure needs that go with it. There's going to have to be some roads incorporated to get access. But any project we can do in Springfield that gets people here rather than somewhere else is great."

One of Thiessen's selling points is the possibility of increased tourism for Springfield. He said the fields at STAR, both artificial and natural turf, could host regional, state and local tournaments that are now held someplace else.

Craig Lansing, a board member with the Springfield Area Soccer Association, agreed, noting that the same concept holds true for all of Springfield's youth sports leagues.

"The major thing we run into in soccer," he said, "is the limitation as far as size of tournaments we can bring in. Our largest tournament is the Governor's Cup in the fall. We'll have 100 to 110 teams in Springfield. We would love to be able to bring in 200 teams. We have to turn teams away every year because there's only so many fields."

Lansing said SASA would continue to use soccer fields at UIS as well as the STAR fields. Soccer World in Springfield is sometimes used from 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. for indoor games, he added, so the need for more fields is there.

'A very good project'

Tim Bramlett, president the Capital Area Sports Commission, also sees the proposal as a boost for Springfield.

"The sports commission tries to draw people into town," he said. "We've done some things that are excellent in drawing people to events. But we tried a couple years ago to get the state (high school baseball) tournament back here, and we couldn't because of the facilities. Same with the Prairie State Games. So we will be as helpful as we can be."

Gary Plummer, director of the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce, wants it to happen as well.

"It's a very good project," Plummer said. "I have to give Calvary a lot of credit for taking it to the point they have so far and doing it so it can become a community project."

Plummer said it makes sense for Springfield athletic organizations to use the STAR Center instead of putting money into renovating existing facilities. Plus, he added, the center would be a draw for tournaments.

"It would be a tremendous asset for tourism," Plummer said.

Thiessen will be working to shore up support from the city, county, school district and park district in anticipation of a more formal June announcement on the project.

Staff writer Deana Poole contributed to this report. Dave Bakke can be reached at 788-1541.

A breakdown of the costs

Mike Thiessen of The Madison Group is proposing a nearly \$60 million, community-owned athletic complex to be built in Springfield. The estimated costs include:

* Infrastructure: \$20 million

Costs include a railroad overpass, extension of Lincolnshire Boulevard from MacArthur Boulevard to Sixth Street along with other road improvements, some site work and limited general parking for the project.

* Community Sports Park: \$10 million

A 3,500-seat baseball/softball facility with artificial playing surface and lights. This facility would serve as the anchor facility for tournaments -- youth, high school and college, if applicable. It also would host soccer and football as a secondary venue.

* Community Stadium: \$10 million

A football, soccer and track facility with artificial playing surface and lights. Could be used as the home fields for the Springfield public schools and as a championship field for tournaments.

* Indoor Complex: \$10 million

A 100,000-square-foot facility that would house indoor turf fields, which could be used for various sports. It would have basketball and volleyball courts as well as batting cages and pitching tunnels. This facility could be owned by the private sector, reducing the overall project's budget.

* Outdoor Sports Fields: \$8 million

A series of artificial and natural play surfaces.

* Miscellaneous/Contingency: \$1.5 million

Source: Mike Thiessen of The Madison Group

The Xanadu debacle

Twelve years ago, there was a gathering of political and business officials for a ribbon-cutting at the site of what was to be the Xanadu sports complex along Interstate 72.

Xanadu was going to offer \$6 million worth of athletic facilities, restaurants, a dinner theater, concerts, mobile museums and trade shows. The proposal included three sports domes of 21,600 square feet each.

None of it ever happened.

Xanadu eventually disintegrated into a tangle of bankruptcy, lawsuits, charges and countercharges. Some of the infrastructure for Xanadu was laid in, but never used.

It took five years for the legal tangles to be sorted out. In 2002, a New Jersey venture-capital fund that had loaned the project \$1.2 million bought the 86 acres at a foreclosure sale for \$500,000. The land was subsequently purchased by Calvary Temple of Springfield with plans to build a new church, school and its own sports complex.

Calvary also bought adjoining tracts of land, giving it about 274 acres in the area, 123 of which would be donated if the proposed STAR Center sports complex is built. -- *Dave Bakke*

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