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Stadium next on boosters' to-do list

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Minnetonka sports boosters, who succeeded in raising money to buy an inflatable dome for use on a football practice field last year, now are setting their sights on funding a new baseball stadium and football practice field.

The playing fields would be built on the west side of the high school, where the current baseball field is located, at a cost of \$2.2 to \$2.8 million. The plan would add lighting and seating to the current field, along with other improvements.

The Minnetonka school board has not given the final go-ahead, but it did agree last week to allow an engineering analysis, including soil samples of the area. The final cost estimate will depend on the test results.

The proposal in Minnetonka is part of a growing trend in which booster clubs are absorbing more of the costs of athletic programs.

Historically, booster clubs have paid for less-expensive items such as new jerseys or new goal posts. Now, more groups are paying for fieldhouses and turf.

In Wayzata, boosters helped fund a bubble similar to Minnetonka's TonkaDome and add artificial turf at one of the district's middle schools.

In Hopkins, boosters helped with fields and fences as well as sod for the high school's softball and baseball fields.

The proposal presented to the Minnetonka board last week included a baseball field with seats and bleachers built into the hill that currently leads down to the field. The field would be covered in artificial turf.

Plans also call for adding a press box, lighting, fencing and a shelter over the bleachers. The stadium would be used for varsity baseball games, varsity football practice and community league baseball.

The baseball field could be converted to two regulation-size football fields for practice purposes, freeing up other space for soccer practices. The infield and bases would be covered with turf and the baseball mound would be removed during the football season.

Under the community group's plans, the district would take on the debt to build the stadium, which the

community groups then would pay back over a period of time. This is similar to the fundraising approach used for the TonkaDome, which is being paid for over a 10-year period with money from sports boosters as well as revenue from rentals, said Tom Berge, executive director of finance for the district.

Berge said the district will pay for the soil analysis, which will be done in the next few weeks.

Buying time for baseball

Members of the Diamond Club, a booster club for Minnetonka baseball from Little League through high school, say there are not enough fields available in the district for the growing program.

The group has talked about this project for 12 years, said Diamond Club president Jon Guy, who is heading up the project.

Guy, whose sophomore son plays baseball and also swims and runs cross country, said the baseball program is growing fast and existing facilities cannot accommodate all the games that area teams want to play.

Junior Babe Ruth, which is for players age 13 to 15, has grown from 150 to 280 players in six years in Minnetonka. Similarly, Senior Babe Ruth, for players age 16 to 18, has grown from three to 12 teams in five years.

Guy said the leagues have to schedule 400 games throughout the season on 11 available fields.

Adding lights to the high school field would create the potential for 100 more games during the summer, Guy said. The stadium seating also would allow the senior Legion team to play home games as well as host tournaments on the field. Currently, the senior Legion team, which includes many varsity baseball players, plays all away games and does not host tournaments.

The varsity baseball team now plays its home games on the field, but the improvements would create more seating for games in a more comfortable setting, boosters said.

Football backers sign on

About four months ago, the Minnetonka football team's Touchdown Club also signed on to the project. Guy said the football boosters also are not happy with their practice fields, and having more people working on the project should spread around the fundraising burden.

"What we've done so far is pretty cursory," Guy said. When the final cost estimates come in after the soil samples, the groups will start raising money from parents, residents, fundraising events, and corporate donations and foundation grants.

Ideally, said Guy and Berge, the stadium could be ready for use next school year, but the project first needs approval from the city and the watershed district.

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