

'The health of our kids'

Today's expo part of drive to create youth sports complex here

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The image of the sports complex practically sparkles on the computer screen.

Visitors enter by driving past two irrigation ponds. To their left, they find six baseball fields. To the right are five softball fields, including a feature field with stadium seating. Even farther back are the two lighted fields for soccer, football or lacrosse.

Then there is the crown jewel: a 90,000-square-foot indoor facility with six basketball courts that can be converted into 12 volleyball courts, plus separate performance areas for martial arts and cheerleading and a multi-purpose indoor arena suitable for indoor soccer, football or lacrosse.

But creating the concept was the easy part. Moving it from the computer screen to the Abilene landscape is the true task.

Jon Smith embraces the challenge. As the executive director of the Abilene Youth Sports Authority, he is leading the charge to try to make the complex a reality.

"We really are in a battle for the health of our kids, and youth sports have proven to be something that kids like to do," Smith said. "They can become fit while playing games. It's not considered boring exercise. Also, in team sports, they can develop friends and relationships, and they're working together for the common good of the team."

Smith said that of about 25,000 kids ages 5-17 in the Abilene area, only about 15 percent are involved in recreational youth sports. By comparison, Amarillo has 36 percent involvement.

"We're not trying to get 100 percent of the kids," Smith said. "There are other things for kids to do. But 15 percent is pitifully low. Even if we can double that number, that's a lot of kids that are getting involved."

Smith said constructing the facility will require \$20 million to \$25 million, which he hopes to obtain through a combination of private donations and public funds. He said the sports authority is exploring funding possibilities with the city and the Development Corporation of Abilene, which administers the city's half-cent sales tax for economic development.

Smith said the sports authority isn't far enough along with discussions to know what type of public funds might sought.

Smith hopes to select a site for the complex in the next 60 days and complete the capital campaign in 12 to 18 months.

The AYSA was founded in 2004 as a nonprofit organization. Smith said the AYSA is designed not to take control of local youth leagues, but instead to provide centralized support to all leagues in areas such as registration and promotion.

In 2005, the AYSA asked the city's bond advisory committee to include \$17.6 million in a bond package to be presented to voters to fund construction of a youth sports complex. The committee, however, chose not to include the AYSA proposal. Committee chair Mike Waters said cost was a factor. The entire bond package, which included money for streets, the zoo, and drainage, was just below \$30 million.

"I think funding will be a problem because it's such a large project, but they made an excellent presentation," Waters said. "It was not singled out as a bad project. We simply were not able to fund all of them, and that was one of the 15 or 20 that didn't make the cut."

In 2006, the AYSA hired Conventions, Sports and Leisure International to conduct a feasibility study for the complex. The study revealed that the multi-purpose indoor facility would fit an immediate need because of the relatively small number of gyms available for volleyball and basketball.

The Abilene Youth Basketball Association currently uses four gyms for league play. Smith said the study showed that Abilene is 10 to 12 courts short of what a community this size needs.

"They told me, 'In a city your size, the normal participation in youth leagues is 1,500 to 1,600 kids,'" Smith said. "We have 600 in ours, so there is a lot of room for growth."

The indoor facility would also create a venue for sports such as indoor soccer and football, in-line hockey, martial arts, cheerleading and gymnastics - sports that either are nonexistent or extremely limited in Abilene because of a lack of facilities. The result would be 27 new leagues in Abilene in addition to those already in existence.

According to the study, the combination of an indoor facility with a baseball and softball complex would make Abilene a prime spot for youth tournaments.

Research showed that teams routinely travel as far as 200 miles for tournaments. With the appropriate facilities in place, Abilene could become a hotbed for regional and state tournaments in multiple sports.

"We really don't have one location that can accommodate that number of gyms and teams for tournaments, which would be a tremendous asset," said Mike Hall, director of community services for the city of Abilene.

While several local baseball and softball fields are getting a makeover (Hall said 14 fields will have new lighting by April 1), local Little League baseball official Richard Martinez believes a new complex suitable for larger-scale tournaments would be a benefit.

"I think a new facility would be a good thing," said Martinez, who serves as a liaison between the Cedar Creek and Abilene North leagues. "It would also help to entice other tournaments to come into town."

The new complex could have an economic impact as well. According to the feasibility study, tournaments and other events at the complex would bring more than \$11 million annually in new spending to Abilene and more than \$500,000 in annual tax revenue while creating 185 full-time and part-time jobs. Of those, Smith said, about 15 would be full-time.

"This really is a two-part project," Smith said. "First is the quality-of-life issue. These facilities will give us an opportunity to get more kids and families involved in quality sports programs, which help keep kids out of trouble and tackle the obesity issue. The other side is economic development. By having this facility, not only can we expand local programs, but we can become the destination city for regional tournaments to the tune of \$11 million a year."

2007 WEST TEXAS SPORTS EXPO

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. today

Where: Abilene Civic Center

Cost: \$2 for adults, \$1 for children under 12

Attractions:

- Youth coaching clinics in baseball, softball and soccer (pre-registration is required)
- Free sports activities: basketball shot, football throw, baseball pitch, tennis serve, golf, hockey slap shot, soccer kick and baseball batting.
- Prize drawings every 30 minutes
- Autograph sessions: 9:30-10:45 a.m. - Cooper quarterback Zach Stewart; 11:15 a.m.-12:30 a.m. - TCU volleyball player Calli Corley, Hardin-Simmons quarterback Jordan Neal and Texas Tech track athlete Lyle Leong; 1:30-2:30 p.m. - Indianapolis Colts long snapper Justin Snow