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Overland Park banks on its place to play soccer

By GRACE HOBSON
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Two years after Johnson County voters rejected a \$75 million bond for soccer fields, Overland Park is set to reap the benefits of its own soccer complex.

The city is building \$35 million in high-grade soccer fields that already have attracted commitments for 19 tournaments worth \$402,800 to the city. And the 12-field complex doesn't open until September.

"There's nothing else around here like what's going up over there," said Geoff Stapleton, the youth soccer director for the Northland Sports Alliance in Platte County. Overland Park is "sitting on something awfully nice."

Soccer enthusiasts — and the Kansas City area is home to many of them — hope Overland Park's development is just the start of a new boom for the sport.

The Wizards' parent company plans to build youth soccer fields next to a new stadium for the professional team as part of the Bannister Mall redevelopment project, possibly in 2011. The company plans at least 12 fields and as many as 30, all tournament-quality like Overland Park's.

Although they'll compete for tournaments, the two complexes will satisfy only a fraction of the area's market for soccer fields, officials say.

"At the end of the day, there is still such an overwhelming need that the more fields you get, the better it is for the soccer community as a whole," said Mike Laplante, manager of soccer operations for Overland Park. "There's enough need out there you can never fulfill all of it."

Michael Meadors, who as leader of the Johnson County Park and Recreation District pushed the failed bond issue in 2006, agreed that the market is ready for more soccer fields, especially the first-class quality of Overland Park's amenity.

"In the next few years, the only question we'll ask ourselves is, 'Gosh, why did we only build 12?' "

The county's \$75 million bond issue called for 24 lighted tournament-quality fields, a training/community center and a hiking trail. The Wizards planned to build a stadium nearby.

A property tax increase would have paid for the bond. The county touted the economic development benefits of the complex, which was expected to draw players and money-spending parents.

Overland Park got into the soccer business after the county's initiative failed. It found city-owned land at 135th Street and Switzer Road, reconfiguring three holes of St. Andrews Golf Club to make room. And it agreed to pay the \$35 million construction costs without a tax increase, using instead an increase in its hotel tax, some liquor tax proceeds and user fees from the complex.

The complex will have three concession buildings and a 16,000-square-foot field house.

The fields are booked for every weekend through November after they open Sept. 1. In March through mid-June of 2010, the fields also will be booked. From mid-August through November of 2010, the city has tentatively scheduled play for every weekend.

In mid-June, July and the beginning of August, the off-season in 2010, some weekends could be open, Laplante said.

Laplante has scheduled 12 tournaments for 2010 and seven in 2009. The tournaments are outsized — an average of 150 teams coming from Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa and Oklahoma. Each tournament is bringing about \$21,000 to the city.

During the week, leagues and soccer clubs will rent the fields for practices. The city hasn't started taking

reservations yet, but officials are certain 5 to 11 p.m. will be busy.

Laplante is bidding for national tournaments and is hopeful he'll land them.

What sets Overland Park's fields apart is that all are lighted and all have synthetic turf. Overland Park officials believe the city has the most synthetic turf soccer fields in one location in the country.

The turf is key because it means weather will rarely cancel tournaments. After heavy rains, the fields will drain quickly.

Most soccer complexes can't guarantee play in bad weather, so the synthetic turf is helping the city land big tournaments, said Peter Vermes, the Wizards' general manager and the executive and technical director of the Blue Valley Soccer Club, which will use Overland Park's fields.

"This complex is going to be so state of the art, so high-level," Vermes said. "It's first class all the way."

The Wizards are planning the same high quality for youth soccer fields at Bannister, Vermes said.

Most of those fields, if not all, will be lighted, Vermes said. They will have a mix of synthetic turf and natural grass, ideal for the professional team's practices.

Vermes is not concerned about competition from Overland Park.

"We're just touching the surface with the amount of fields you need," Vermes said.

Shane Hackett, executive director of the Heartland Soccer Association, agrees. His association, which registers 30,000 soccer players in Johnson County each year, is adding staff in anticipation of sponsoring more and bigger tournaments because of the Overland Park fields.

He anticipates that Heartland will be able to sponsor some of the largest tournaments in the nation.

"I can't even believe it, it's so incredible," Hackett said of the complex.

"It's beyond our expectations, what they've done out there. It's going to be an incredible draw."

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