



Case for Support
February 6, 2013

Introduction

What does it take to build a strong community? A 2010 Gallup poll revealed that three significant community features drive attachment and a sense of belonging. These three things encourage people to come, and to stay.

First on the list is the social setting: arts and cultural opportunities, and whether people in the community care about each other. Second is the community's openness to different types of residents, including singles, families, seniors, and more. The third most powerful draw to a community is its aesthetics: the overall physical beauty and the availability of parks, playgrounds, and trails.

How does Sparta fare on this grading scale? Number one: check. Sparta is a place of caring. It's a place where good people live, people who have strong values and a sense of responsibility to their community. It abounds with festivals and celebrations and occasions to get together with neighbors. Number two: check. Sparta has well-established families, young families, some ethnic diversity, as well newcomers who are putting down roots. But on the third most powerful aspect of drawing people to the community, that of outdoor resources, Sparta falls woefully short.

The proposed Recreational Park & Sports Complex is designed fill this gap. It will leverage investments that have already been made in the infrastructure of the community. It will also strengthen Sparta's social offerings and broad-based appeal, while filling the significant gap that currently exists in outdoor recreational and sports opportunities.

Our Current Reality

Sparta is a community of active people. A multitude of 5k runs, competitions and festivals bring people out in droves. For instance, the 2012 Turkey Trot - a 5K race held on Thanksgiving Day - attracted more than 200 people! There are more than 1,200 youth athletes in grades K-12 that represent baseball, football, soccer, cheer and rugby. More than 30% of the families here have children under the age of 18.

Unfortunately, the community resources do not support an active, vibrant lifestyle. There are only six non-school fields for tee-ball, Little League and football scattered over the village and

township, none of which occupies space that was originally intended to be a sports field. None of the fields have bathrooms or concessions. One does not even have a parking lot! Teams are constantly juggling schedules to make the resources stretch far enough to meet the demand. While the school graciously shares its fields when they are not in use, the reality is that the school teams use them a great deal of the time. Other than these few outdoor fields for baseball and soccer, there are really no other parks or outdoor recreation areas in Sparta.

The existing fields, which are more than 40 years old, have been lovingly stewarded. Although dedicated volunteers carefully tend to the existing resources, the reality is that even the grass is original! Regular maintenance is always performed, but necessary upgrades such as adding irrigation or providing handicap-accessible seating have not been done. It is also incredibly difficult and time-consuming to move equipment and find people to care for six fields when they are scattered across roughly four miles. The conditions are so bad that other sports teams have refused to travel to Sparta for games.

The community is focused on development, as evidenced by the monies spent on a new high school in 2005 and other development efforts such as the downtown streetscape in 2009, and infrastructure development through the new water treatment and wastewater treatment facilities. But young families will not stay in the community if it does not have the outdoor amenities that encourage youth, adult and family activity. Without young families, the community will stagnate and die. Something must be done.

Our Proposed Solution

The township, the village, and organized sports teams have worked very hard to achieve alignment on a solution that meets all needs. Hundreds of residents have also weighed in on the plan through town hall meetings and surveys. A master plan for a 90-acre year-round Recreational Park & Sports Complex is the result of this work. The Sparta Recreational Authority (SRA) was formed as part of this effort to oversee construction and funding development.

The Recreational Park & Sports Complex will fill several critical roles for Sparta.

- Access to outdoor activities. The master plan includes eight baseball and softball fields, three football and rugby fields, five soccer fields, picnic areas, two miles of nature trails for walking and biking, concession stands, a Legion memorial, a playground, a dog park, frisbee golf course, shuffle board, winter ice rink and sledding hill, basketball courts and an indoor community center. Every resident can find something to enjoy and a reason to get outdoors, whether it's for exercise, socializing, or cheering on family and friends. The location is in walking distance from downtown, neighborhoods and schools. It was also chosen to connect with the master trail plan, increasing walkability and connectivity within the community.
- Attracting and retaining residents. Outdoor amenities are not just a "nice to have." They are an essential influence in why families choose to live where they live. Many families with young children view sports and recreation as essential, and will make residence choices based on the breadth and availability of options for their children.

- Economic development. League sports and travel teams are big business, and there is high demand for complexes that have the capacity and flexibility to host league or tournament play. This complex will provide that capability, and it will be the only such publicly-accessible sports complex within a 15-mile radius. (The closest similar park is Whistlestop in Byron Center.) This represents significant economic potential. A baseball tournament, for example, could bring in upwards of 1,500 people spending money on lodging, food and fuel in one weekend.

The township has purchased an 90-acre parcel located just northwest of downtown Sparta on North State Street. This strategic location puts the Recreational Park & Sports Complex within walking distance of downtown Sparta. Downtown businesses will be in an ideal position to benefit from residents and visitors using the Complex. So will children coming from the schools, as well as neighborhood residents who are out to get some exercise.

Once the Complex has been built, it can generate the revenues needed to be self-sustaining. Proceeds from concessions and field rentals for tournaments and leagues will more than cover the necessary maintenance costs.

Conclusion

There can be absolutely no doubt that physical exercise is good for the body as well as the mind. Study after study has demonstrated tangible links between regular exercise and the reduction of major illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and stroke.

Organized sports provided the added bonus of teaching life skills. Although we often think about these skills in connection with youth, the fact is that no one is too old to become a team player! Everyone benefits from learning discipline, cooperation, perseverance, and from making new friends.

Sparta is in the process of growing and transforming into a community of choice: a place where people choose to move, and they choose to stay. The Recreational Park & Sports Complex will be a pivotal asset that will attract residents, create opportunities for better health, and drive economic development. Once it has been built, it will be self-sustaining. The township has purchased the property, it's in an ideal location adjacent to downtown, and the residents have come together to build an inclusive plan that includes something for everyone. In a very practical sense, the "perfect storm" has come together to bring the Recreational Park & Sports Complex to life.

Is the community willing to invest in the long-term positive impact of this project?