

Working with

Community Groups

by Jim Puhalla

For those of us in the sports-field business, groups of fans and supporters are part of the environment. Schools have boosters and alumni organizations, and youth sports are managed in most areas by community sports associations. Sometimes these groups are just a few moms and dads with a cigar box for the treasury, but others are sophisticated organizations with six-figure budgets.

Whichever kind you encounter, learning to work successfully with these community organizations can make a big difference in the quality of your fields and the number of headaches you encounter. Now that people can't count on government spending to build or renovate their recreational facilities, these associations are raising more and more of the money that pays for sports-facility projects. If you can develop some skills for helping these local organizations raise money, the effort can be mutually beneficial.

Let's start with the assumption that most community-group members have little or no knowledge about what you do. Little league parents may or may not help maintain the fields. They may help fix the mudholes when it rains, and they know when there's a visible problem with the field, but they don't have much of a sense of what goes on between games.

Raising awareness

Community groups do raise money—they help pay for equipment, uniforms, insurance, and referees. If you work it right, they can also help raise money for field-improvement projects. But 'working it right' is largely a process of raising awareness.

First of all, it's very important to keep records of the different ways that the condition of the fields affects the sports played on them. Have someone take pictures of the field, particularly

of any problems, like standing water on the infield of a baseball diamond. Keep a record of rain-outs, special work that has to be done to allow a game to go on, and extra expenses that are incurred because of the condition of the field. If you can show your public the cost of a bad field, you can get them involved in making improvements—and in raising money to pay for them.

I would also make an effort to remind people that fields are safer when they are maintained well, and that kids play better when they have

shows the regular maintenance work that must be done, along with larger projects that will require special funding. This type of plan shows the public work that can be covered by your operating budget and work that will require their financial help. It takes a few hours to prepare a plan like this, but it makes it much easier to get help from community groups.

You can also use the original plan to report back to these groups on a regular basis, and each new year you can quickly update the plan. This can be an important step in making sure you have money for future projects.

It's also important to think expansively when you're considering which groups may be able to help you and how they can support your work. Remember that there may be foundations or charitable organizations in your community that are willing to support projects like yours. If you've ever done any work with foundations, you may know the basic principle of their operating philosophy: most will not give money for regular operating budgets, but they will often consider funding capital improvements like new fields and upgrades. A recent high-profile

project to construct a playground in our community was paid for in large part through a grant from a foundation that only gives money for playgrounds.

The kind of long-range plan I've been talking about can be a big help to members of a community group who may be assigned to contact local foundations. It identifies those capital projects that fit their way of doing business.

In some cases, you can involve booster groups from other sports, or even the band. At one high school in our area, the band boosters raised money to put lights on the high school baseball field. There were just two conditions: that the band be allowed to use the field for practices one night a week,

Figure 1. Projected three-year budget.

Sports Field Budget					
See Details on Page #	Field and Description of Job	Current Budget pd by District	Three Year Plan With Support From Organization		
			1998	1999	2000
	Field: All				
2	Job: Fertilization	3,500			
	Field: Football & Soccer				
2	Job: Silt Seeding	1,750			
	Field: Baseball & Softball				
3	Job: Lip Removal & Grading	1,250			
	Field: Football Stadium Field				
4	Job: Deep Tine Aeration		1,250		
	Field: Football Stadium Field				
5	Job: Installed Irrigation System		6,000		
	Field: Baseball				
6	Job: Soil Amendment			3,500	
	Field: Baseball				
6	Job: Re-do Infield Grass				3,000
	Totals	6,500	7,250	3,500	3,000

good fields. Some football fans might get a charge out of seeing kids battle it out in the mud, but most people understand the principle that slipping and sliding around means players are off-balance and more susceptible to certain kinds of injuries. Bringing the safety issue to the attention of group members can really help get people involved.

Budgeting

Another way to increase community-group involvement is to make a budget plan for your key facilities. The most effective plans schedule at least two or three years in advance.

Figure 1 is an example of a budget plan that extends for three years. It



This football field reconstruction project was completed at about half the usual price because of community participation. Volunteers included members of the football team, who turned out to help lay the sod they would play on. *Courtesy: Jim Puhalla*

and that the field be lined as a football field. This kind of unusual arrangement allowed everybody to win.

Sometimes school teams hold games in parks, or at fields that are owned by community groups. In these cases, don't hesitate to get the school's boosters involved in helping to raise money for field improvements. If big projects need to be performed on your field, a little advance thinking about

others that use (or could use) that field can yield big dividends.

Working with volunteers

Most field managers eventually get involved in projects that use volunteer labor from community organizations. Volunteers can help with anything from raking the infield, to assisting with purchasing and other administrative tasks. Good help can slash the cost of a project, but if you're not careful, volunteer help can also be a nightmare.

If you plan to have volunteers working on a project, I advise you to call the person who handles your insurance. Ask a few questions about how volunteers are covered by your policies. If they're not covered at all, check into the cost of riders or other changes to get them covered. No matter how much volunteers may protest their commitment to the organization, a slight injury may send them scurrying to a telephone to call an attorney. If you let children help out (or minors of any age), be very careful about how they're supervised.

When you have volunteers at work, it can be tricky to direct their efforts without making them mad. People feel that if they're volunteering, they should be

allowed to do the job any way they want. The result could be messed-up contours, or dragging that does more harm than good—you can imagine the possibilities.

Tact is important. If you see a volunteer doing something the wrong way, explain what you're trying to achieve, and then tell them how you want them to do it. For example, "Bob, we need to keep that grass edge clear so water will drain off the skinned area—so let's make sure we lift the drag to keep from pulling soil into the grass."

Sometimes members of the group will volunteer to get you materials at a big discount, or to simply take care of buying them for you. When you hear that kind of offer, beware! Keep an eye on what you're getting. People who are donating things feel you should be grateful for whatever you get, and they tend to think 'dirt is dirt.'

We've had to go through entire truckloads of donated topsoil to screen out hundreds of pounds of scrap metal before we could use it. Do yourself a favor, develop the skill of gracefully saying, "That's very generous of you, but it's not really what we need." You'll thank yourself.

Continued on pg. 29

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Even kids can get into the act in community projects, but make sure they're supervised properly and that insurance coverage extends to volunteers working on the job.

Courtesy: Jim Puhalla

Warnings for contractors

If you're a contractor rather than a staff member at a school or park, here are a few suggestions from someone who's been put through the wringer on several occasions when volunteering to help a community group.

First of all, volunteer your services in writing. Treat it like any other job. Create an estimate or work order that shows what you'll do and what, if anything, it will cost. Add a line that says "additional work will be quoted separately." That way, if people start thinking up other things they'd like to have done, you have a little protection.

Second, count on complications. Facilities owned by community organizations are notorious for problems that should have been fixed back in the Korean War days. You're also likely to encounter projects that were done by inexperienced volunteers who think you can solve any problem by spreading dirt on it. Add 25 percent to the amount of time you budget.

Third, never count on volunteer labor. "We'll have a few of the boys come and help. You can just supervise!" Yeah, right. Most volunteers get there late, eat donuts, get in the way for a while, then leave to help the Mrs. get groceries. If you need help to do the project, take your own. Otherwise, you could be there for days.

Fourth, be careful what you "guarantee." If you won't be working on the field on a continuing basis, put in writing what the organization will need to do to keep the facility in decent condi-

tion. Otherwise, if bad maintenance causes the field to start holding water in five years, the next generation of volunteers may demand that you rebuild it for free, and then bad-mouth you all over town if you refuse. Carefully establish just how much of a warranty you intend to offer.

As with any job, the secret to creating a happy community-group customer is good communications. Don't assume that volunteers understand your business or the demands on your time. Put things in writing, and talk through the project to avoid misunderstandings.

Consider your relations with community groups to be part of your facility management job. If you keep them in touch with your work, you can get them more involved in helping to raise money and otherwise support your program.

It also helps to be a fanatic about the quality of your fields—and to try to make your people fanatics, too. If you have at least one high-quality showplace field, it

will be easier to get support from community groups to raise money for future projects on all of your fields.

In today's environment of declining public budgets for facilities like sports fields, keeping groups like boosters and sports associations involved in your work can make the difference between having first-rate fields and making do with less. It's definitely a management task, but one with such high potential rewards that it's well worth learning. □

Jim Puhalla is president of Sportscape International, Inc., of Boardman, OH, and Dallas, TX. He is author, with Mississippi State University Professors Jeff Krans and Mike Goatley, of a forthcoming book: "Sports Fields—a Manual for Design, Construction and Maintenance." Copyright 1998, Ann Arbor Press, Inc., Chelsea, MI.

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