

Financing and constructing a new field

Charles Dickens might say it was the best of times and the worst of times. Field managers might not be quite that dramatic, but they're no strangers to the risks, rewards and challenges of their profession.

In terms of sports, however, it is the best of times. The demand for quality fields is at an all-time high. It's easy to see why: more kids are playing than ever before. In fact, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) just released its annual

Sports Participation Survey, which as it has every year for more than two decades, shows more kids playing sports than the previous year. In fact, in the 2011-12 academic year there was an all-time high of 7,692,520 participants.



Photo courtesy of Verde Design, Santa Clara, CA

Look at the top 10 of those sports, and what do you see? A lot of sports fields getting used: football, soccer, lacrosse, baseball and softball are all in the top 10 most popular sports. That adds up to the previously mentioned demand for facilities.

Given the rise of these sports, the turf field could be the best of choices. After all, it's able to host multiple sporting events in the same day without getting skinned, it's not susceptible to many of the problems facing natural grass, and it has better drainage by far than fields that will become muddy following a rain.

Unfortunately, in the current economy, budgeting for new fields—natural or synthetic—continues to be a problem. And sports field builders are seeing schools faced with an impasse when it comes time to build or rehab fields.

But, say the builders and designers, things are looking up.

"We think the tide is slowly turning," says Paul Schinner of The Motz Group, LLC in Cincinnati. "Most contractors in our business were hit harder in 2010 than they were in 2008 or 2009. Now, as things are slowly picking up with the economy, we are hoping that people who have been on the fence will start to spend. The amount of off-season activity (re-

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quests for budgets, consultations etc.) seems to be encouraging."

So where does that leave us? With choices. Sometimes they're difficult, sometimes they're easier than others. According to the book, *Sports Fields: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*, sports field managers facing field construction or improvements can help by suggesting options to lessen the financial burden. Some concessions to be considered:

- Do you need a completed facility now or can you wait a while for fencing, lighting, seating or other aspects of the project? If some aspects will be delayed, be certain to include the means for future additions (extra conduit for future lighting, piping for future irrigation, etc.) in the initial phase.

- Have you decided upon a given surface or specific site, or are you willing to consider alternatives?

Seeking creative solutions to budgeting issues can be accomplished—but it must be done in the planning stages. Once construction has begun, change may not be

easily accommodated, or if it is, it may wind up causing more delays and costing more money—the exact opposite result you were striving for.

The book also notes, "In budget planning, consider not just initial costs but also costs of accessories and amenities to be added later such as goals and maintenance equipment. The cost of financing should be considered. Consider also the long term plan for the use of the facility. Before committing to a project, be certain that you can afford the schedule of maintenance, as well as a reserve for eventual repair and/or replacement. Expert and diligent maintenance is necessary to extend the useful life of fields."

While budget planning can be intimidating, it can open the door to possibilities for more economical options. In fact, in some installations, project owners have taken the concept of saving money, and elevated it to a whole new level. Sam Fisher of Fisher Tracks in Boone, IA watched a high school build a competition-quality track

and field facility by using community donations and input.

"Local people came in with tractors and backhoes and did what they could," noted Fisher. "They did a lot of fund-raising too, within the school."

The former facility had become dangerous and unusable, and had to be completely demolished before any work could begin. But with the town firmly behind the effort and merchants and residents contributing everything from materials to labor to monetary donations, a new facility was built, and came in 25% below budget. (The facility currently has a 400-meter all-weather rubberized track encircling a natural turf football field, with field events, restrooms, concessions, seating for home and visiting fans, a press box, parking for cars and buses and more.) Fisher points to it as an example of community involvement that can help finance a project.

Schinner, too, has seen schools working to raise funds for their own projects as well.

"Booster groups are becoming a bigger part

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and taking a much larger role," he notes. "In some cases, they're completely financing projects. Also, there has been a shift to sponsorships from local business and hospitals that are adding funds in exchange logos on the fields, naming rights etc. Schools are trying to leverage donated 'in-kind' work from local contractors and alums for certain parts of the project that do not interfere with manufacturers' warranty such as drainage pipe and stone, excavation and concrete work."

All the pros note that cutting corners should never be done at the expense of the finished product. In working to bring down costs, it is essential for consumers to remember that sports facilities are specifically tailored to athletic use. They are not simply green spaces, grassy areas or anything else. (And when working with a turf surface, this goes without saying).

Seek out contractors, as well as designers and suppliers, who specialize in sports facilities, and ascertain that they understand all issues the project will be facing, including time constraints, budget requests and more. Ask where community involvement would

be appreciated, and where it would be appropriate. The investment in knowledgeable partners will pay off throughout the course of the project, and in years to come.

If you're not sure about how to find a sports-specific contractor, ask for recommendations from colleagues who have put in or rehabbed sports fields. Find out who they've worked with, and whether they were happy with that person. In addition, find out whether the project proceeded on time and on budget—or whether there were surprises, good or bad. You can also go to the website of the American Sports Builders Association, www.sportsbuilders.org, and use the search feature to locate companies in the area.

Once you have the right partners, it's time to make sure your organization works well with them. The old adage, "too many cooks spoil the sauce," is still valid. For a project to be successful, there must be one person (and only one) who is authorized to work with designers, contractors and more, in order to discuss the ongoing status of the project. Examples of this person

might be a school principal, field manager, athletic director or other. That person, in turn, should establish a flow of communication with those working on the project, as well as with the end user. Regular meetings should be held to discuss the progress of the project, as well as any questions or concerns. That point person, then, can relay this information back to the design/build team.

Expertise and information are the most important commodities that should be working together to make your project succeed, both from a financial perspective and from a performance standpoint. Singly, expertise and information are valuable, but together, they're invaluable, and will give you the long-term satisfaction everyone wants. ■

Mary Helen Sprecher wrote this article on behalf of the American Sports Builders Association. Available at no charge is a listing of all publications offered by the ASBA, as well as their Membership Directory. For info, 866-501-2722 or www.sportsbuilders.org.

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