

Expanded Gulfport Sportsplex aims to enhance sports tourism on Coast

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GULFPORT -- When expansion is completed in late spring 2017, the Gulfport Sportsplex will be one of the largest ball complexes in the region.

The city is not so much looking to make money off the sportsplex as to draw in visitors who spend their money in restaurants, hotels and shops, and tell their friends what a great place the Coast is to visit.

The city has set aside \$8.5 million from a loan to add eight ball fields, two multipurpose fields for soccer and football, and all the amenities those fields will need.

Walkways and road work also are planned.

Leisure Services Director David D'Aquila said expansion should allow the sportsplex to attract more collegiate-level tournaments, particularly for soccer and softball.

"As an economic driver, the facility has done what we hoped it would do," D'Aquila said. "What this expansion does is put us in a position to compete with larger facilities for the next 10, 15 or 20 years. Sports tourism is very competitive."

Last year, 2,400 teams came through the sportsplex for tournament play, with 65 to 70 percent coming from other towns. D'Aquila said the number does not include league play.

The city will host 11 college teams this weekend for the Mississippi Gulf Coast Softball Classic. Each team will book 20 to 30 hotel rooms.

"We definitely view sports travel as an integral part of the tourism market for the Mississippi Gulf Coast," said Renee Areng, executive director of Visit Mississippi Gulf Coast, the official tourism bureau.

Recognizing sports tourism is big business, VMGC changed one of its staff positions in the fall to include sports marketing. VMGC also ordered up the first comprehensive plan for growing sports tourism on the Coast. The Huddle Up Group, a sports-tourism consulting company based in Phoenix, is expected to present its plan to Coast tourism and sports professionals at the end of March. Huddle Up representatives visited the Coast for several days. The company's plan will encompass Harrison, Hancock and Jackson counties.

"They were overwhelmed with the options we have," Areng said. "They just thought it was unbelievable. We're really looking forward to this being a great tool to elevate tourism on the Coast."

City leaders believe the sportsplex has helped grow business along the Interstate 10 corridor. Three hotels have opened north of I-10 off U.S. 49. A Mugshots Grill & Bar and a Buffalo Wild Wings Grill & Bar are being built off Daniel Boulevard. The Gulfport Sportsplex is only a short distance away, off Canal Road. The city plans to connect Daniel Boulevard to the I-10 Service Road, adding an east-west link between U.S. 49 and Canal Road.

The city expects to award a contract soon for clearing about 25 acres for the sportsplex expansion. Design work should be completed by May, with construction expected to start this summer.

Read more here: <http://www.sunherald.com/news/local/counties/harrison-county/article62351747.html#storylink=cpy>