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District explores baseball alternative to aging stadium

By **TIM WILLERT**

Updated: 11.02.10

With Don Ford Stadium showing its age, New Caney Independent School District officials are exploring the possibility of moving their high school football games to a proposed minor league baseball stadium along U.S. Highway 59 in Porter.

A fact-finding group that included Superintendent Kenn Franklin, athletic director Doug Bonsal and East Montgomery County Improvement District President Frank McCrady, traveled to Birmingham, Ala., Oct. 20 to check out a long-standing arrangement between the Birmingham Barons minor league baseball team and Hoover High School, which share playing time at Regions Park Stadium.

"From the surface it felt like a football stadium and not a baseball field," Bonsal said. "That tells me anything is possible."

The Barons of the Southern League are the Class AA affiliate of the Chicago White Sox. Hoover High is a football power, with eight state championships, including six since 2000.

"I think we got some great information," Bonsal said. "Do I think it can work? Absolutely. It's ultimately going to come down to what is best for the community."

If the inaugural New Caney-Porter football game Sept. 24 was any indication, Don Ford Stadium may no longer be serving the needs of the community.

There was not enough seating or parking for the standing-room-only crowd, which exceeded 4,000, Bonsal said.

"It's completely out of date, it has some serious deficiencies," he said of the 38-year-old facility, which seats about 3,800 and is home to the varsity football teams at New Caney and Porter along with the New Caney junior varsity football and boys and girls soccer and track teams.

The stadium, according to Bonsal, lacks the modern amenities to accommodate a growing community, which now includes an additional football program at Porter High.

"I think our kids deserve a quality place to play," he said. "I think our kids and our fans deserve a showcase facility."

Besides an aging press box, there's the issue of the grass surface, which now has to withstand nearly double the number of varsity football games.

"It is extremely worn," Bonsal said. "It just can't handle this kind of punishment."

Franklin could not be reached for comment.

The Porter Crossing project, which will include a minor league ballpark with permanent seating for 4,500, is a public-private partnership with EMCID, Ventura Sports Group and Wallace Bajjali Development Partners of Sugar Land.

The 80-acre mixed-use project, between U.S. 59 and Loop 494, will include a hotel and retail development and is scheduled to break ground before the end of December, McCrady said. First pitch is scheduled for spring 2012.

"I think the arrangement (Hoover) has with the stadium in Birmingham is a model that could potentially work here as well," McCrady said.

The trip to Birmingham is just the first step in what is expected to be a lengthy process. The district's Stadium Review Committee also is considering a bond referendum to renovate Don Ford Stadium as part of a larger district bond project.

Along with possible renovations to the stands, press box and overall configuration, Bonsal said the district is looking at the possibility of replacing the stadium's natural grass surface with synthetic turf.

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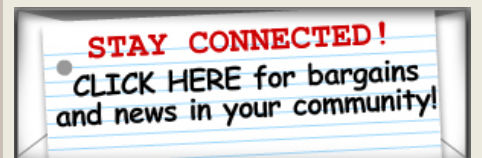


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