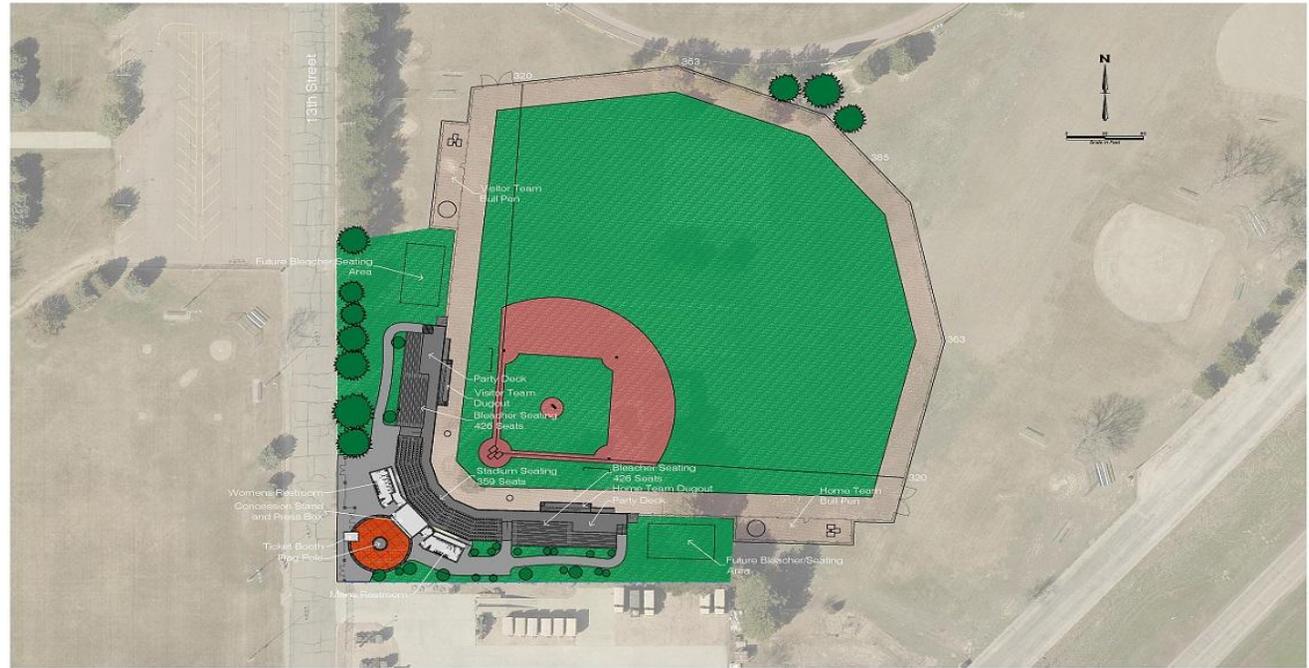




Oregon Trail Park Baseball Field



Creating a field of dreams

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By Brad Staman Editor

Work began Monday morning on the new baseball diamond in Gering's Oregon Trail Park, which could become home to a new baseball team.

The timing is perfect, both Gering Mayor Tony Kaufman and Expedition League President Steve Wagner said.

Wagner is working on creating a new collegiate baseball league.

The new ball diamond could, with a few changes, house a team in the new league.

The new league, called the Expedition League, will consist of teams in Nebraska, Wyoming and the Dakotas, Wagner said. Teams will consist of college age players from across the country.

"These kids are looking for exposure to professional scouts," Wagner said. "A select few make it to the big leagues."

Players, like Detroit Tigers' Justin Verlander and Washington Nationals' Max Scherzer, have come up through colligate summer leagues.

"There are 35-40 leagues like this across America and Canada," Wagner said. Some of the best collegiate leagues include the Prospect League, the Coastal Plains League and the Great West League.

"This will be a for-profit league," he said.

The teams will be a franchise with local individual or group ownership. The teams and league will be similar to minor league baseball.

Seasons will run from early June through mid-August and feature 64 games, 32 home games.

"This falls right in line with our parks and leisure services master plan," Gering City Administer Lane Danizuk told the recreation committee Friday.

Communities with collegiate league teams see a real strong positive economic impact, Wagner said. Each team will be have a \$500,000-\$600,000 operating budget. The budget will include four or five full-time employees and a number of seasonal employees.

Every dollar invested in the community turns over six to seven times which would mean a \$4 million impact, Wagner said.

The team will sign a lease for games played at the ball field. The lease will be for five years with the option to extend the lease.

"We want to be in the community for a long, long time," Wagner said.

"The ball park being built in Gering is awesome," he said.

The field will be 320 feet in the right field, 385 feet in center field and 330 feet in the left field, Gering City Engineer Paul Snarr told the Gering Recreation Committee Friday.

A few additions to the original plan will be needed, such as additional seating, bigger bathrooms, locker rooms and more parking.

The parking lot in front of the Gering Swimming Pool will also have to be expanded. Parking could also be added on the east side of the new diamond, Gering City Council member Justin Allred told the committee.

"This is going to be a first class facility when it is completed," Kaufman said.

"The timing is good," Danizuk told the committee, "but it is still not going to allow us to use the (new) field this next season. We will have to use diamond one for the first season." Using diamond one is not ideal, Wagner said, but it could be used.

"Our target is everyone in the community, but we especially want to target families," Wagner said. "We want people to come to the ball park and have a great time."

The great time will include baseball, fun activities between innings and a party deck for companies to hold gatherings, birthday parties and much more. The goal will be to draw close to 1,000 people to each game from a 35-40 mile radius.

The break-even point is to average 500 people per game, Gering City Council member Dan Smith told the recreation committee Friday.

"It will be a great entertainment opportunity," Wagner said. "Our league is all about fun."

The goal is to start playing in either 2017 or 2018. The first year there may only be six to 10 teams, Wagner said.

"We are looking at having two different divisions," Wagner said. "Ultimately, we would like to have 14-18 teams in the league."

Communities looking to host a team include: Gering/Scottsbluff, North Platte, Hastings, Omaha and/or Lincoln in Nebraska; Rapid City, Pierre, Aberdeen and Mitchell in South Dakota; Casper, Cheyenne and Gillette in Wyoming and Williston, Minot, Dickinson and Grand Forks in North Dakota.

"There are a few other communities and we might slip down into northern Colorado and Kansas," Wagner said.

"We really want this to be a positive impact on the community," he said.

"This is the communities team," Wagner said. "We will have a name the team contest and the community will design the mascot. It is your team and we want the community to take pride in their team."

With the timing working out as it has, Wagner is 90 percent positive a team will be playing in Gering either in 2017 or 2018.