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Expedition league ready to play ball in 2018

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JERRY PURVIS/Star-Herald

This area of nondescript turned earth behind the Gering National Guard Armory will soon be transformed into a baseball field to host the Gering team of the Expedition League. Play is expected to start in 2018.

A few of tomorrow's major league baseball stars might get their start in Gering, as a new summer exhibition league will begin play in the summer of 2018.

The Expedition League, with teams across the Midwest, has come to an agreement with the city to bring a team to Gering. The wood-bat summer league will feature players from NCAA Division I and Division II colleges and universities.

The expansion of the ball fields in Oregon Trail Park began with a 2015 feasibility study to determine how the city could best develop its recreational facilities, Gering City Council member Dan Smith said. Smith was one of the people appointed to a committee that would make recommendations for potential projects.

In 2016, Expedition League officials contacted Twin Cities Development (TCD) about a potential home for a team. That contact led them to Gering.

"I met with league officials to look at what city would be best for them," said Sean Overeynder, TCD Community Development Director. "Gering was already building a new ball field to accommodate more regional tournaments. After the league looked at demographics and other documents we pulled together, they made the wise decision to come to Gering."

So far, teams in the league's southern division have been formed in Hastings, Gering, Casper, Wyoming, along with Rapid City and Pierre, South Dakota.

Northern division teams include Aberdeen, South Dakota, Grand Forks and Minot, along with either Dickinson or Fargo in North Dakota, and a team in Brandon, Manitoba, Canada.

"The league had originally planned to start play in 2017, but it was a little too ambitious because they had to get all the cities on board," Smith said. "We're still on schedule for 2018."

Expedition League President Steve Wagner said the league is in great shape.

"We've made a tremendous amount of progress in the last six to 12 months," Wagner said. "We're on track for at least an eight-team league in 2018. We hope to have as many as 10 teams."

Wagner also likes to see partial or full local ownership for the teams. Local owners are closer to the community and are able to better promote their teams. However, some outside investors own portions of several teams around the country, so they're able to provide expertise on how teams operate.

According to Smith, start-up costs for a team are about \$250,000 with an operating budget of about \$600,000 a season. League figures show a break-even point of about 500 people in attendance for games.

The City of Gering, which owns the field, will lease it to the new team. Grass and a new sprinkler system will be installed this spring. Bleachers, restrooms and a concession area will be ready before the start of play.

Initially, bleacher capacity will seat about 1,000 spectators, with expansion planned as the league grows.

"City of Gering officials have been great to work with," Wagner said. "The new ball field looks like it's going to be a beautiful park and we're excited to be a part of it."

The idea of college athletes playing in regional summer leagues certainly isn't a new one. There are an estimated 40 to 50 such leagues now in operation throughout the United States.

Players aren't paid for the summer league, but housing with local families will be arranged for the season. In addition to gaining valuable game experience for their college careers, players might be spotted by major league scouts for potential talent to be developed.

Teams will play a 64-game schedule, starting in early June and running through mid-August. That includes 32 home-and-away games, mostly among teams within the division.

"Everyone I've talked with has told me this is a great opportunity for Gering," Smith said. "We already had the plan in place to build the field, so the league caught us at just the right time. It's a great fit for us."