



Hellgate gets closer to having a track of its own

By NICK LOCKRIDGE of the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, June 13, 2011 10:16 pm



Alan Pfister envisions an area where members of Missoula Hellgate's track and field team can make their own marks - and their own memories.

The Knights' coach, who just finished his third year as head of the program, will see that vision become a reality this summer thanks to a renewed agreement between the city and the Missoula County Public Schools district that will help turn the River Bowl into a real practice space in time for next season.

"For Hellgate to actually have its own facility for track and field would be huge," Pfister said. "We can look like a team now. Instead of looking out there and seeing purples and reds and other colors, we'd just see one - our team."

For decades now, the Knights have been practicing alongside their rivals at Sentinel High School, using Stegner Field for track work and the adjacent fields for throwing events like the shot put, discus and javelin.

The Hellgate project would add two permanent sets of concrete throw rings, a sand pit for long and triple jumps to be used with roll-out runways and a temporary pole vault area on the tract of land - owned cooperatively by the city and MCPS - which lies east of the Madison Street bridge and on the south bank of the Clark Fork River.

The immediate improvements also include an 18-by-20-foot storage shed for equipment and a new fence around the cul-de-sac at the end of Fourth Street with a gate to protect the facility from any vehicle traffic. This first phase of the project costs \$300,000 - all privately raised - and is slated for construction next month, Pfister said.

Missoula Parks and Recreation director Donna Gaukler, who likes Pfister's vision, helped facilitate the process, including meeting with the City Council and its sub-committees as is required in the original 1983 agreement between the city and schools.

"Most residents in downtown Missoula, the hip strip and their neighborhood have said it's important to support Hellgate in its current location," Gaukler said, "and if that indeed is important, then it's equally important to support them with a facility or a homefield within walking distance, to do their activities."

"Those are important places where young people grow up and become healthy adults," Gaukler added. "That's where the schools and our parks missions are very united."

There were only a few areas where the two sides needed to come closer.

Public usage and safety concerns, obviously, were two of the biggest hurdles to clear for Pfister and the schools. They had to ensure that the public would not be in harm's way during the course of a normal practice, especially with throwing events like the discus.

With that in mind, Hellgate will construct a removable barrier near the berm that separates the far field from the river trail system. The barrier will sit more than 200 feet out - well beyond the current Montana high school record - but able to catch any discs that skip farther than intended.

"The schools have done a fantastic job of watching out for the safety of their students," Gaukler said. "My concern was with an open park where there are throwing events."

Some members of the public and City Council members expressed concern at their public hearing in March that pedestrians may be harmed because that section of the river trail is one of the largest commuter areas in the state because of its proximity to the University of Montana. For that reason, the schools had to agree to put up sandwich boards near the trail, so users knew a practice was in session and agree to only hold practices down there.

"The city doesn't want to develop it to the level that we can start hosting meets or anything," Pfister said, "because of the parking issues that it'll create and disrupting the business owners down there."

After people and children, the safety of their dogs was the next biggest concern.

"You can yell at kids and hold them back, but dogs don't always listen," Pfister said. "I don't think English is their first language."

"Even though dogs are required to be on a leash and kids are usually with their parents, that's not always the case," Gaukler said. "Not everyone is aware what kind of damage they (discs) could do. That's why we're going to have a lot of signage - we're probably exceeding the minimum of what we need to do - for the awareness of the normal park user."

Both sides went the extra mile to make sure the new River Bowl would be a safe environment for everyone. That's why the javelin is one event that will stay at the Sentinel fields, at least for now.

"They need 100 yards of impact area to be safe," Pfister said. "They have a great set-up at Sentinel that we will continue to use a couple days per week."

Pfister would like to eventually bring the javelin to the River Bowl, but knows more safety barriers would need to be installed and a strict practice schedule adhered to in order to prevent injuries.

Gaukler doesn't think much, if anything, stands in the way of the project meeting its end.

"I can't think of anything other than a glitch in fundraising, but hopefully that won't happen," she said. "Alan and the school's staff have done a lot of homework to gather all the funds and the information necessary to get this thing to happen."

Most of the feedback has been extremely positive, Pfister said, especially from one of Missoula's more vocal sub-sections: runners.

"Oh, they've been great," he said. "They wanna know how they can help and what they can do. The big thing is how to raise \$200,000 for what we call Phase II."

The second phase of the facility, which Pfister hopes to start in another two years, is a six-lane, all-weather track surface made from recycled rubber. On the far, east end of the track there will be a rubber pad where high jumpers can practice. Also, once the track surface is laid there won't be a need for the roll-out runways because the backside of the track doubles as the runway for the jumps and vault.

"My goal," said Pfister, whose daughters are just entering high school, "is in four years, for my kids to be running on a track."