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CENTERPIECE

Contractors Break Ground For Indoor Recreation Center At Rockingham Park

By HARLEIGH CUPP Daily News-Record

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Groundbreaking for a new indoor recreation facility at Rockingham Park is expected to begin this week.

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PENN LAIRD — Even though the Rockingham County Board of Supervisors voted to approve construction back in August, contractors will finally be able to break ground on the highly debated yet highly anticipated Crossroads Field House this week.

The field house will be an 80,000 square foot, \$13.5 million, indoor recreational facility that is set to include a collegiate-level indoor track, four full athletic courts and multiple classrooms for other indoor activities. Construction will take place on the park property located directly behind the strip mall and while preliminary work like setting up silt fences has already started, workers should start moving dirt soon.

"We have the opportunity to build a facility that will meet a lot of local recreation needs across a full age spectrum," County Administrator Stephen King said, "and we're able to do it with taxes from visitor spending."

King explained that this recreation center has always been part of the master plan created in 2014 for the park itself. Planners made a commitment to work on all the outdoor fields and components first, giving the start of an indoor facility no sense of urgency.

According to King, the addition of the field house to Rockingham Park has proven to be controversial among the board. Much of that controversy, however, was rooted in concerns about where the money to pay for such large project was coming from and several members of the community were hesitant to agree

Crossroads Field House is a unique case compared to financing for other public projects because it is primarily being funded by visitors' tax dollars, not the residents.

In 2019 — the same year the park was completed — the state of Virginia approved for Rockingham County to raise its transient occupancy tax from 2% to 5%, thus generating an extra 3% of tax revenue from visitor spending to be used toward tourism related investments, King said. Over the years, that fund has been granted to townships for special projects and invested in the county fair but a reasonable sum remained that initiated the pursuance of bringing an idea for an indoor recreation facility to life.

Like a gift that keeps on giving, the facility is expected to attract more visitors who will spend money in the county and continue to ramp up the TOT fund, thus making the entire project financially sustainable.

"The very fund we're pulling out of to build the facility is the same fund that money will be returned to as more people travel to the park," King said.

Another unique point that King made when describing the county's investment in the field house is that since the contract was awarded to Lantz Construction — who is based out of Broadway — and most of the subcontractors are local too, over 75% of the contract amount of \$13.5 million will be put back into the local economy anyways. Other partnering companies include Monteverde Engineering, Viola Engineering, LDD Blueline, Trumbo Electric, Riddleberger Brothers, Algers Excavation, A&D Applicators and more.

Rockingham County parks and recreation staff are excited about the groundbreaking because of the vast number of opportunities a facility like this will provide. In fact, the entire parks and recreation department will be relocated to the Crossroads Field House in order to utilize current talent to support more programs that will be able to take place right outside the office door.

Historically, county parks and recreation has relied on partnerships with public schools to host after school and similar programming, and while staff expects to maintain a working relationship with the schools, having infrastructure of its own will broaden the county's capability for community programs.

A major benefit of the field house, King remarked, is the indoor track. There are very few indoor track facilities within driving distance of county schools, and none that exist in the Shenandoah Valley. Establishing an indoor track of its own will provide county students with a place to practice and host meets. And when the students aren't using it, there is the opportunity for seniors to be able to run and walk when it is too cold or dark to use the paved walking path outside.

"That's good," King added, "for both the county's physical wellness and mental health of its residents too."

A project of this magnitude is expected to take until the end of 2025 to be completed — but the benefits it promises for the Rockingham County community will last exponentially longer.

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