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Light plan casts pall over park

El Dorado Hills residents threaten a lawsuit over lighted ball fields.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published October 14, 2004*)

The future of a park that would provide much-needed athletic fields for the rapidly growing community of El Dorado Hills has become entangled in a dispute between nearby residents and sports groups over whether the fields should be lighted to allow nighttime play.

The battle, which has some homeowners threatening legal action, has prompted the El Dorado Hills Community Services District board to postpone consideration of the park design for a month to receive more public comment.

Residents of new neighborhoods near the Promontory Park site near Sophia Parkway and Alexandra Way say the proposal that has emerged through workshops represents a vast improvement over an initial park design unveiled in June. But they seek one further concession - elimination of playing-field lights.

Representatives of athletic groups, however, say they gave up a ball field to meet neighborhood demands for a more balanced park, and they're not giving up a feature that would maximize use of the remaining fields.

"There are still lights; that's what we're going for," said Greg Fishburn, a spokesman for the Foothill Girls Softball League.

"First they fought everything. Now they are focusing on the lights," he said of homeowners in the Promontory development. "They've known of the lights from the get-go."

Bill Majernik, an attorney who recently moved into the Promontory development, said residents are not opposed to the park. "We as homeowners really do not want to stop this park from being built," he said, noting he has children ages 4 and 8 he expects will use the fields.

But Majernik said he told park district staff members Oct. 4 that the homeowners would seek an injunction to stop the expenditure of public funds on the park if the district proceeds with a plan for lighted fields.

Residents acknowledge that when they purchased their homes, they signed disclosure statements advising them that the park would feature lighted playing fields, but they say they weren't prepared for the size of the park's sports complex. "The disclosure everyone signed said the park will have a lighted field but not four or five fields," resident Tom Manriquez said.

Majernik said the 1997 environmental impact report for the Promontory development identified a 10-acre park with trees and grass. Now, he said, the plan calls for an 18-acre sports complex, a use that the report did not analyze.

The board was scheduled to take up the design issue tonight, but due to the amount of public comment

the district has been receiving, district general manager Wayne Lowery said staff members decided last week to postpone the matter until the board's Nov. 18 meeting.

The postponement means no decision will be made until after the Nov. 2 election in which two incumbents on the district's board of directors face three challengers.

Lowery said the current proposal calls for two lighted softball-baseball diamonds, a lighted soccer field with artificial turf, two lighted tennis courts, two bocce ball courts and two basketball courts - a full court and a half court.

A ball field was eliminated from the original plan to make room for the tennis courts, he said, and senior citizens had requested the addition of bocce ball courts or horseshoe pits.

The plan also calls for a 3,000-square-foot community center, a children's play area and a water play area with a fountain and ground jets.

"The park is beautiful," Majernik said.

But he and other homeowners say the design is marred by the inclusion of 23 70-foot-high light poles. Majernik noted that in a 1999 settlement agreement with the environmental group Taxpayers for Quality Growth, the developer of the Promontory subdivision agreed to use low-intensity street lighting. A lighted sports complex, he argued, runs counter to that effort to minimize nighttime lighting.

Promontory resident Darin White organized meetings with representatives of Little League, girls softball and soccer organizations over the summer to try to resolve park use and lighting issues. White said the athletic groups expressed less interest in lights than in ensuring construction of additional fields.

Eric Moser, president of El Dorado Hills Little League North, said he participated in the initial meeting with White. But in meetings with district staff members, he said, sports group representatives were told that the district board would decide the park's design and would not be bound by any agreement negotiated by community groups outside the boardroom.

Little League is interested in increasing the number of fields, he said, "and if they're lighted, that's a plus for us." That's what the plan calls for, he said, so there appeared to be no reason to negotiate for something less.

However, Majernik said homeowners were offended by what they viewed as the district's effort to derail an amicable resolution to the dispute.

Moser said the need for more fields is critical. He said 980 youngsters participated in El Dorado Hills Little League this year, and he predicts sign-ups next spring could total 1,200. While participation is increasing, he said, the league no longer uses dirt fields at some elementary schools because of concerns about naturally occurring asbestos.

The Foothill Girls Softball League likewise needs more fields to serve an increasing number of players from El Dorado Hills. Rocky Smith, league vice president, said about 40 percent of the players are from El Dorado Hills, but due to the shortage of fields, most of the games are played at Buckeye Elementary School in Shingle Springs.

He said lights would double the use of playing fields, particularly during fall and winter when it gets dark early.

Lowery said soccer fields are in even shorter supply than softball and baseball diamonds. The Promontory Park plan calls for a soccer field with artificial turf, which runs about twice the cost of regular turf. Field lighting that would allow for maximum use is necessary to justify the higher cost, he said.

This is not the first time lighted fields have encountered opposition in El Dorado Hills. Lights installed in 1989 in Community Park at El Dorado Hills Boulevard and Harvard Way drew complaints from a large number of residents, many of them from Stonegate Village, behind the park.

Four of the district's five directors were defeated in re-election bids in 1990, while a fifth director declined to seek another term. The five new directors voted at their first meeting in December 1990 to remove the Community Park lights.

District officials say sports lights have been improved in the intervening years. Lights now are shielded to illuminate only the playing fields and prevent light from shining onto adjoining property. The district's Web site says examples of the proposed lighting system can be viewed at McCabe Field in El Dorado Hills, Mann Family Park on Black Diamond Drive in Folsom and Play Fields Park in Davis.

About the Writer

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