

Indoor sports facility planned for northern St. Johns County

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BY STUART KORFHAGE

Lisa Davis says she is no expert in the demographics of families and participation in sports in North Florida, but she has enough personal experience to know the landscape could be better.

So she's acting on it.

Davis, through St. Johns Development Partners LLC, is planning a massive indoor sports complex in the northern part of St. Johns County called Project Family. It's planned for Race Track Road near the Durbin Park commercial development.

It's the kind of facility that has been built all over the country, especially in cold-weather states. But at an estimated 175,000 square feet, Project Family will be unlike anything currently in St. Johns County.



St. Johns Development Partners is planning a massive indoor sports complex in the northern part of St. Johns County called Project Family.

Davis said there are recreational facilities scattered all over the area that serve residents, but that's the problem: they're scattered.

The Duval County resident said she's seen her family, which includes four nephews and a niece — all age 10 or younger — constantly run all over town taking children to practices and games and struggling to get home in time to put everyone to bed at a decent hour.

"It basically came from us sitting around the table (discussing the situation)," Davis said. "We were saying it would be great if they were all in the same place."

Project Family will attempt to help solve that problem by allowing siblings participating in different activities at the same place. Davis said she hopes it can be a big relief for families trying to accommodate everyone.

Among Davis' ideas for the project is to have a service to transport athletes from school to the facility so that practices can start earlier and end earlier. It could also ease the stress of parents having to rush home from work to get their children to practice.

Another potential advantage is the facility will have a place for adults to exercise or maybe catch up on some work while their children are with their coaches.

After buying the land and contracting with a consultant, Sports Facilities Advisory of Clearwater, Davis said she learned about the true demand for a business like Project Family in the area.

Originally, the plan was for a 30,000-square-foot facility that had just a few offerings, but the more research Davis did, the more need she saw.

The current plan is to offer practice and/or game facilities for baseball, softball, basketball, lacrosse, football and volleyball as well as general fitness opportunities.

"It started off being really small with baseball, softball and gymnastics and it grew from there," Davis said.

According to what she was told by the consultant, Davis said the sports venue could reach maximum capacity within three years.

That would thrill Davis, who said she's a big advocate for children participating in team sports. She is the CEO and founder of a business called Analytics Partners and said she always looks to hire people who have played team sports.

She played softball at the University of North Florida and said athletes learn great life lessons from their sports. Opening Project Family will hopefully provide more opportunities for young athletes, she said.

"We're not looking at this opportunity to make a fortune," Davis said. "We wanted to have an impact on the community."

The project could make a good deal of money for several entities.

Wil Smith, the county's director of parks and recreation, said Project Family gives the county a chance to market itself as a place for more athletic events.

He said events, including things like Triple Crown softball/baseball tournaments, brought in almost \$14 million last year with the county spending just \$161,000 in marketing. Project Family gives the county another venue to steer people toward without having to worry about the overuse or maintenance of county facilities.

"It's really going to help us with our sports marketing initiative," Smith said. "We do have a lot of fields in that area, but because participation is so high, there's little leftover

capacity for sport marketing. This project is coming in where we have high demand for additional fields. They're filling that demand."

Nearby, Durbin Park is expected to have 2.4 million square feet of retail development and up to 350 hotel rooms. So those using Project Family are likely to become customers of Durbin Park businesses, especially out-of-town families traveling for tournaments.

The entire St. Johns Development Partners property won't be used for sports. Another 125,000 square feet of commercial development will also be part of the project on the 42-acre parcel.

For now, Davis said she doesn't know exactly what will go in that space. A restaurant or two would be a nice complement to the sports facility, but it will all depend on the market.

Davis presented her plan Thursday evening to the St. Johns County Planning and Zoning Agency, which recommended approval by a vote of 6-0. Before Project Family can be built, the land must be changed on the Future Land Use Map designation from Rural Silviculture to Intensive Commercial. Since the land is surrounded by other commercial land, the PZA praised the proposal as ideal for the area.

"This makes so much sense," PZA member Dick Williams said. "This is really neat for our area."

The next step will be approval from the County Commission to transmit the application to the state regulatory boards.

If she can get approvals and permitting done soon, Davis said work could start on Project Family as soon as early 2017 and open about a year later.

"We have gotten huge amounts of support all the way across the board," Davis said of county planners and others in the administration. "Everybody has been very helpful."