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U. to Upgrade Recreation Space

By Rod Kurtz
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Bower Field's renovation will yield improved field space for club sports on the eastern edge of campus.

In the latest step in its continuing efforts to improve the state of campus recreation facilities, the University unveiled plans yesterday to renovate and improve Bower Field -- the site of Penn's existing baseball facility -- and transform it into a recreation space for club and intramural teams.

The baseball team, meanwhile, is scheduled to move into a new 1,000-seat park at Murphy Field -- which previously served as a recreation space -- in time for the spring 2000 season.

"There's been ringing enthusiasm for the Katz Fitness facility [in Gimbel Gymnasium], but whenever I hear a slight gripe and grumble, it comes from the contingent saying 'we don't have enough intramural and club sports open fields,'" University President Judith Rodin said yesterday.

Athletic Director Steve Bilsky said that officials are going forward with the combined \$2 million project mainly to improve the campus recreation landscape --not solely to provide a new home for the baseball team.

"[The new baseball field] was driven by recreation," he said. "It always has been."

Bilsky said that Bower Field, located just east of Franklin Field, will be much more accessible to club athletes than Murphy, which is on the southern corner of campus near the intersection of the Schuylkill Expressway and University Avenue.

The field will be re-sod and will have nighttime lighting, which Bilsky said will effectively "double or triple" the usage value of the field.

And officials said Murphy Field was the right choice for a new baseball facility because of its accessibility and proximity to the players' lockers in the Hollenbach Center.

With the development of the two fields, the University hopes to make the east side of campus the hub for intramural and club sports.

"We want this to be a place that, all weekend, morning, noon and night, is an active part of campus," Bilsky said. "We would like to see campus move to the ultimate east boundary and be an active, vibrant part of campus life."

Construction on the two fields will begin with the close of this year's baseball season. Bower Field is expected to be ready this September, while Murphy Field will be completed in time for the 2000 baseball season.

The dimensions of the new baseball park will be roughly the same as Bower, Bilsky said. The new stadium will hold 1,000 seats, a large difference from last fall, when Bilsky told The Daily Pennsylvanian that the stadium would seat 2,000 fans.

Murphy Field closed to recreation teams earlier this semester when construction on a new \$64 million water treatment plant began.

The baseball facility's price tag will be completely paid for with private donations, including one "significant" gift from an anonymous donor that allowed the project to get on its feet, Bilsky said, adding that officials have had an easy time soliciting money for the construction.

"The people who have given to this point have done so because they believe it is good for both recreation and the intercollegiate [baseball program]," he said. "They've given willingly because they like the concept."

The renovation period has already created a shortage of playing fields for club sports. But Bilsky said that until the new Bower Field opens, varsity teams will share facilities like Franklin Field. Temporary lighting will also be installed at Hill Field to increase the amount of available space.

Penn's relative lack of indoor and outdoor recreation space has long been a hot topic for students and administrators.

A study conducted by the Brailsford & Dunlavey consulting firm two years ago recommended that the University quintuple the amount of recreation space on campus.

Last summer, the University added the new, 7,500-square-foot Katz Fitness Center to Gimbel Gymnasium at a cost of \$1.2 million, and officials have said they plan to pursue additional renovations to the aging building.

According to Rodin, possible Gimbel renovation plans run from another quick upgrade that could double the size of the fitness center to a total renovation of the complex.

"We are very eager to expand the Gimbel facility," she said. "We're really thinking very creatively about how to accomplish that."

Rodin added that, with the opening of Sansom Common and the construction of the new \$120 million Wharton School building nearby, Gimbel "has become an extraordinarily more attractive naming opportunity" in the eyes of prospective donors.

Another possible location for further recreational space is the 14-acre U.S. Postal Service lot just north of Bower Field. Though not expected to be put on the market for another two years, Penn officials have long considered the plot of land a natural extension of the University's boundaries.

The area could eventually be home to a recreational fieldhouse, which the Brailsford study recommended be built. The price of such a complex would likely run into the tens of millions of dollars.

"We would have to demonstrate a multi-use space for [the postal property] that would definitely include a high-density athletic facility and other open spaces," Rodin said.