

The Sanford Herald

January 31, 2015

City: Sports Complex Could Be an 'Economic Anchor'

By Zach Potter

SANFORD — The Sanford City Council's dream of a multi-sport complex at O.T. Sloan Park took another step toward becoming a reality Friday when council members met with representatives from Brailsford & Dunlavey, a Washington, D.C.-based program management firm, to fine tune their vision for the project.

"Their goal was to take the pulse of the community and elected officials," Sanford Mayor Chet Mann said after the meeting. "They seem to have a firm grip on what we're looking for."

Mann said he had a multi-sports complex in mind when he ran for mayor in 2013, and last year the city council agreed to the feasibility study to determine the cost and a building timeline.

One of the main questions asked at the meeting was whether the council saw the park more as an economic engine to bring in people from out of town or as a facility to be enjoyed by Lee County residents.

"The direction we gave them was that we wanted it to serve a combination of the local community and to be a targeted approach to the outside community," Mann said. "We want this new park expansion to be a landmark, a destination place for Sanford."

Councilman J.D. Williams agreed that a large, modern sports facility could boost Sanford's profile and help attract sporting events and the fans and athletes that come with them.

"I have a grandson who plays travel ball," he said. "When they have a tournament down at the beach, my wife and I will go and stay down there three, four, five days. Even though we go for the tournament, the beach is a draw. Well we don't have a beach, so we need something else. This could be an identifying point for the city and county."

The complex, Mann said, would make Sanford a more attractive place for people to live, and that it would help alleviate what he called an outflow of children and an inflow of workers.

"We export kids every weekend to other towns to play at their venues," he said. "They go to places like Asheboro and Cary. Why don't we have them coming here?"

"At the same time," Mann continued, "4,000 people come into Sanford every day for work and then go home. What do we need to do to get them to consider making Sanford their home?"

The complex is planned as a public-private venture, and Ray Covington, chairman of the Friends of the Parks Foundation, said he has seen a lot of community support.

"I think it could bring about a wonderful economic engine for Sanford and Lee County," he said. "I think the unified support of the elected officials has encouraged industries and private citizens to step up to the plate and say, 'Yes, we want to be a part of this.'"

For Mann, the sports complex is just one piece of his vision for an economically competitive city and county.

"Along with the community college bonds and the sidewalk bonds, we now have an opportunity for overnight stays for businesses and sports tourism," he said. "We're looking for [the complex] to be a massive economic anchor to draw people here."

It will take Brailsford & Dunlavy about three months to review the council's input and come up with a building plan, Mann said, and that the city would distribute public surveys to residents about what they wanted out of the complex within a month.