

Youth sports in squeeze play

Suburban sprawl is forcing area clubs to find places to play on their own initiative.

By Jason Thomas

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Most youth sports organizations rely on partnerships with school districts or municipal parks. But tight budgets and bloated school facilities are forcing more and more organizations to find their own solutions. The Pike Youth Soccer Club, for example, has a first-of-its-kind partnership with IndyParks and Recreation. "It's always a concern for youth sports," said Don Rawson, executive director of Indiana Youth Soccer. "I think there's always going to be a competing interest for land. It's been far more difficult over the years than easier, no question. Everybody struggles with it to some degree." The Pike Youth Soccer Club has provided its own answer. This time next year, as many as 1,500 youths donning shin guards will dig their cleats into freshly sown fields at Eagle Creek Park. The 80-acre complex -- complete with three ponds and a mile-long greenways trail -- is a first-of-its-kind partnership between IndyParks and Recreation and a youth sports club. All it took was six years and a mountain of fund raising. "It's very exciting," said club President Thomas Geisse. "This is something our little club decided it could do, and it's quite astounding when you think about it."

In 1999, an agreement was signed to develop land at 56th Street and Reed Road -- future home of the youth club and its traveling squad, Indy Burn. The club contributed more than \$525,000 in development costs -- the final figure will be closer to \$600,000, Geisse said -- and the Parks Department will maintain the land, allowing other residents to take advantage of the open space. "It is very unique to have a youth sports group have that amount of resources to bring to the table," said Don Colvin, administrator of resource development with IndyParks. "Typically, we build the facilities, and they help with the program side of things." Dirt was turned in 2003. Soon, children will traipse down 14 soccer fields -- more than twice as many as at Pike's current site at Northwestway Park, 62nd Street and Moller Road.

"It's definitely forward thinking for IndyParks," said Kristen Weaver, public information officer with IndyParks. "We're able to build a soccer complex because of Pike Youth Soccer helping us. We couldn't do that with public funds." The final price tag for the sports complex is more than \$2.5 million. "It's maximizing our community dollars," Colvin said. "The nice thing is, at the end of the day, you have 1,500 kids participating in the league. So you have instant success."

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