IT TOOK A LOT OF TIME — AND MONEY — BUT THE AHC ATHLETIC FACILITIES WILL FINALLY BE RENOVATED

Field of dreams (and green)

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It took a long time and a lot of conversation, but a dream by the Hancock College athletic department has begun to become a reality.

On Tuesday evening, the Hancock Board of Trustees voted to approve a capital project that will improve athletic playing fields.

As part of Measure 1 bond money, the project will relocate the baseball facility across College Drive — next to the existing softball field — layout two full-size soccer fields and construct a brand new track and football practice facility. A new Industrial Technology building will be constructed where the current track is located.

“It's overwhelmingly exciting,” said Hancock Athletic Director Kim Ensing. “For the last couple years we've been involved in meetings to talk about a project that may or may not get funded.

“I would like to say it was because of my personal efforts, but it really wasn't. The board embraced the challenge as well as Dr. (Jose) Ortiz, the VP’s — it was a collaborative effort.”

For years an upgrade of athletic facilities has been discussed. Things became more serious during the bond campaign, but when the final list of projects was decided on, athletics was in danger of not getting any of the $180 million in funds with the multitude of projects that were needed.

When several projects came in under cost, more money was freed up and the athletic project was back on the table.

"About two years ago they began talking about a preliminary allocation of $2.2 million for PE and athletics," Ensing explained. "Initially they focused on Building N, which involves our locker room space, showers, etc..."

"After talking more extensively with our department and users, we all thought it would be prudent to request that they take the $2.2 designation and think about allocating that to a fields project for several reasons."

Ensing mentioned that the state rarely funds playing fields, but rather focuses on buildings. She also said the track has become a safety issue in it's current condition and the irrigation issue on the fields needed addressing.

“So we requested they reconsider the direction that the $2.2 million would take,” she added.

Dr. Ortiz, President and Superintendent of Hancock College, understands the importance of athletics at the community college level.

"What people need to understand is that athletics — as we see it — is not something separate to what we do," he said. "Our student-athletes are an integral part of our academic environment.

"It’s an opportunity for them to not only play the sports they so love, but it’s also an opportunity to move to a four-year institution and continue their education."

Ortiz explained how the bond process progressed and how additional money became available in order to pursue the current plan.

"As we proceeded, we started allocating dollars to projects on the priority list that we had," he said. "As we started drawing down we began looking at what other projects we could do.
"As we did that, the administration asked how we can get more bang for our bucks and we asked if there were any projects we could combine."

The Athletic Field/Industrial Technology project did come hand and hand. With the new technology building being built, the track would have to be moved, which began the domino effect of moving several aspects of the playing surfaces.

"We were going to remodel the existing building then realized it would cost more than building a new one," Ortiz continued. "Then there was the ripple effect involving the placement of the playing surfaces."

Jim Glines is the President and Chief Executive Officer at Community Bank of Santa Maria. The longtime bank executive also is the chairman of the Joe White Memorial Fund Committee, which was formed to honor his friend, the late Hancock athletic director Joe White, while raising funds to upgrade and name the school's gymnasium after White.

The Joe White Dinner has now grown to help fund improvements to several of the existing facilities and will continue when it holds the 10th annual dinner on Aug. 20.

"It's huge news," Glines said about the project getting passed. "We've waited for this day a long time, but I don't think that diminishes the impact the Joe White Committee has done in the past or is able to do in the future.

"They will still need scoreboards, there will be press boxes, restrooms — there will be a lot of auxiliary stuff still to do."

The Joe White Committee is currently adding upgrades to the softball facility.

"We have a scoreboard purchased and on the grounds," Glines continued. "We still have some laser-leveling to do in the outfield, they still need batting cages and some sprucing up, too.

"There is still a place for us in this thing — it's not time to take off, this could be a new beginning."

The project is tentatively scheduled to begin in the latter part of 2012.

"I would like to think it will be completed in time for intercollegiate sports on the new fields in August of 2013," Ensign said.