

Daily Record

.com

October 15, 2009

Central Park at former Greystone sees upswing in athletic events

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PARSIPPANY -- Morris County athletes are bringing their games in increasing numbers to the recreation facilities at Central Park at Morris County, the freeholders were told Wednesday.

The report by county park commission executive director David Helmer was part of a presentation that updated the board on the progress of the transformation at the former Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital into a county facility.

Morris County purchased 303 acres of the site from the state in 2003 for \$1 with the goal of creating a park that offered passive and active recreation facilities and a central location for several county non-profit agencies. A new \$170 million Greystone hospital opened last year on the state-owned western portion of the site.

The county has been discussing with the state the potential purchase of an additional 130 unused acres on the site. The acreage consists of several small plots and the former main hospital building, said county administrator John Bonnani.

The state, as part of declaring the building as "surplus," is studying costs of mitigating the asbestos and other hazards and the cost of demolition, said Tom Bell, a spokesman for the state treasury department that supervises the building. The effort is routine, he said, and not an indication of any pending action.

County engineer Stephen Hammond said Morris County has spent \$10 million to demolish several buildings, clean up the sites, construct the recreation facilities and install new utilities and infrastructure.

Hammond said the next big expense will be \$5 million to begin the work on the former Central Avenue Complex, an 80,000-square-foot building into an office complex, and down the road, an additional \$12 to \$14 million for completion of the Central Avenue Complex work and additional recreation facilities.

Helmer said diverse groups of athletes from handicapped softball players, runners, soccer players, roller hockey players and kick ball players take to the fields weekly. The Miracle Field, a soft surface that allows handicapped athletes to easily roll wheelchairs during games, also is used by kickball, baseball and flag football teams.

The twin roller rinks are home to soccer games, roller hockey and practices by Morristown's roller derby team, the Morristown Madams and a Hackettstown team, which use the rink for practice and fitness training, as do local ice hockey teams, Helmer said.

The installation of field lights extended the hours of use, he said. The recreation facilities were opened in July 2008.

The new cross country trail has drawn hundreds of runners, he said. There are also plans for a volleyball league, and in the winter, once ice has been installed in the rinks, for sled hockey games for handicapped players.

Some of the leagues on the Miracle Field use trainers to help the players, allowing parents to finally watch their family members enjoy the sport, Helmer said.

Hammond said the effort to transfer the county's sites from derelict buildings left open to the weather for years when abandoned by the state, required the cooperation of his department, human services, the park commission and the state Department of Human Services.

The work has resulted in additional storage for county departments, beginning development of the non-profit center, and the opportunity for recreation expansion, Hammond said.

Mary Jo Buchanan, the county's human services director, said the goal of the county has been to "create a center of wellness and recovery" at the Central Park.

Starting with the development of the center for the ARC of Morris County, which serves developmentally disabled persons, to the transformation of six homes on Ruth Davis Drive into transitional housing for former Greystone patients -- a service developed by Community Hope and CBHC -- to the newly opened buildings that houses three non-profits, Buchanan said the county is ready to tackle the next phase of the center.

That work includes the construction of a new home for the Interfaith Food Pantry, which is raising funds for the work, and the eventual opening of the Central Avenue Complex. St. Clare's Behavioral Health Services will be the prime tenant, she said.

Other recreational facilities include a new trail from Parsippany's Mountain Way recreation center, a dog park and the development of new playing fields for soccer, lacrosse, rugby and field hockey, officials said.
