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Man dreams of field for disabled

By KORIE WILKINS , Of The Oakland Press

07/13/2003

July 13, 2003

Steve Peck wants to build a field of dreams.

Moved by a public service announcement featuring a boy in a wheelchair holding a baseball bat, Peck was led to the Miracle League - a Georgia-based nonprofit organization dedicated to building baseball fields for mentally and physically challenged children.

"This is such a great, great program," said Peck, of Birmingham. "To see these kids play and see how much they want to do this ... wow. Their heart and desire are so strong."

Peck, who owns a business in Southfield, is working to bring one of the specially designed fields to either that city or Troy. He expects to decide in the next few weeks and break ground by the end of the summer.

"I want to be playing ball in 2004," he said.

Southfield City Council members are open to the plan and offered Peck space on the Civic Center property on Evergreen Road.

In Troy, the city is open to the idea but doesn't have land immediately available for the project, said Stuart Alderman, superintendent of recreation.

The city is reworking its plan for the Civic Center -- where officials want to put the field - but cannot make a decision until the plan is finished.

"It's a great idea, and it is very unique," Alderman said. "But at this time, the city can't commit to building anything on the Civic Center site. We're interested, and we're glad to be considered."

"This is great for this area."

The field would be about the size of a T-ball field and would be made from a rubberized material that allows children in wheelchairs or with walkers to maneuver.

The fields typically cost about \$500,000 to construct, and Peck - who got the rights to Miracle League for Michigan this winter - is trying to raise the money through donations, grants and sponsorship fees. He wants the host city to donate the land for the field to save on costs.

While the host city would be able to use the field when Miracle League teams aren't playing, Peck anticipates that there won't be much free time.

According to 2000 U.S. Census figures, there are 5.2 million children in the United States with disabilities. In Michigan, Peck estimates there are about 250,000 children. "The need is there for this," he said.

According to Diane Alford, executive director of the Miracle Network, there are 61 fields under development across the United States.

"We're really growing," she said.

Formed in Georgia in 1998 by Eddie Bagwell, the Miracle League began with 35 players on four teams. Players are assisted by able-bodied "buddies," who help them run bases, hit and throw. Every player bats at least once per inning, and all base runners are safe.

Neither team keeps score, and everyone wins.

"This league isn't about competition," Peck said. "It is about playing the game."

But Peck said the program isn't just about sports. It also helps players make friends and become more confident in their abilities and self-worth. Watching their children play baseball also helps parents, he said.

"Parents have a chance to sit back and watch their children do something they never thought they'd do," Peck said. "This really is a win-win for everybody."

On the Web

- For more information, visit www.michiganmiracle.org.

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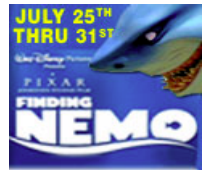
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