



GRAND OPENING:

New Chappapeela Sports Park will open Jan. 31 in Hammond, LA !

By: Joan Davis

HAMMOND, LA. — Hammond Area Recreation District 1 will hold a grand opening for the new Chappapeela Sports Park on Jan. 31.

Jason Hood, a member of the board governing the park, said the time of the event is not set yet; however, the public will be invited to come and tour the facility, which is located on 90 acres of land near Interstate 12 and North Airport Road in Hammond. And, to kick off the grand opening, basketball games and soccer games will be going on that weekend.

Hood, who is a Hammond city councilman, said the new park will operate much like Ponchatoula's park on Hoover Road, and indeed, it was with the help of Director Dr. Bill Wheat that the Hammond Rec District was able to accomplish building the park. "Dr. Wheat was a great help to me," Hood said. "Any questions that I had. We were starting this thing from scratch and didn't know what to budget for light bills, salaries. He helped me a lot."

For Hood personally, construction of the park is a dream come true. "Hopefully, people will realize I live up to what I say, I make it a priority," he said. "It's probably been 15 years or better that this is needed in Hammond. I'm glad I was a big part of making it happen."

Voters in the Hammond Area Recreation District approved a 15-year 10-mill property tax for development of the new park in November of 2010 on 90 acres purchased by the city for \$2.57 million from Encore Development. The cost of the park itself is \$16.6 million. The Hammond Recreation District is like Ponchatoula's in another aspect: the city has nothing to do with the park other than the fact that it is inside the city limits, he said. The recreation district is a taxing governing body of Tangipahoa Parish, and the five-member board is appointed by Tangipahoa Parish Council members for five-year terms.

The Hammond Recreation District encompasses more than the city limits, stretching from Tangipahoa River east to the Livingston Parish line west, on the north "gerrymandered" in some places, "going a couple miles down Morris Road," and on the south to Interstate 12. "The district is larger than just the city limits of Hammond," he said.

Hood said he saw the need for such a park when he was running for city council six and a half years ago. "The talk was that Hammond didn't have adequate recreation facilities," he said. "I researched what Ponchatoula had done, and I realized the only way to fund something new was to pass a tax. I got appointed to that recreation district board, and we promoted and campaigned for a 10-mill property tax which passed in November 2010."



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The board hired engineers and architects and bonded the tax out so that they could build the park immediately, he said. ***Chappapeela Sports Park will include 21 soccer fields, 12 baseball/softball fields, a gymnasium, two football fields, a 1.5-mile jogging/walking trail, three fully-equipped playgrounds for children and a splash park.***

With Ponchatoula's recreation park just south on Hoover Road, Hood said the rec district would like to plan events in conjunction with Ponchatoula. "Nothing is set in stone, but certainly we would be willing and ecstatic to work with Ponchatoula," he said. "They paved the way for us and made it easy. People saw how Ponchatoula did things, even though the tax barely passed. We owe it to Ponchatoula because of the foundation they laid."

Running the new sports park will be Randy Alvarez, who was hired last March and has been commuting daily from St. Francisville where his house is for sale.

His background is in parks and recreation with over 25 years experience, he said. He started his career at Baton Rouge Parks and Recreation and was there from 1987-2002. He then became director of the recreation district in West Feliciana Parish until taking the job in Hammond. He's particularly excited about Chappapeela Sports Park's 20,000-square-foot gymnasium and is already anticipating the addition of classrooms when the budget allows. The gym currently has two full-size basketball courts, an administrative area and board rooms, a concession area and outdoor seating. The original plans called for three classrooms which for budgetary reasons were taken out, he said.

"That's one of my goals, to get that put back in," he said. "It was planned to be able to add these rooms as soon as the budget can afford it." Alvarez said the new park is acting as facilitator with user groups in the rec district and is meeting to discuss use of the facility. The new group is called the Hammond Area Recreation District Chappapeela Sports Advisory Council, and includes all user groups already in existence, like the South Tangipahoa Youth Soccer Association, city of Hammond Recreation, Hammond High and St. Thomas Aquinas High School.

"Our district encompasses the city of Hammond and outlying areas and is for the citizens of this district," Alvarez said. "We're here for all the user groups and are not here to take over their operations. We want to help them enhance their programs and make them better. That's the direction we're taking."

Alvarez said he's hosting an average of 12 to 15 participants at each meeting, representing 10 to 12 user groups in the area. Discussions center around how he can get the facility ready for their use.

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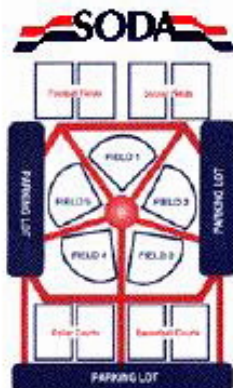
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"We're putting in procedures where we're making sure when user groups come out that it's ready to use," he said. "If it's basketball games, the gym will be set up and ready to go. If it's soccer, the fields will be ready." After the long grand opening weekend of games, Alvarez said he has a flag football tournament on the books for the first weekend in March, with many more to come.

For the remainder of January, contractors are still on site finishing up punch lists, and Alvarez is getting maintenance in place. The district has hired Sports Turf Specialists of Welsh, La., a private company to handle turf management. Hood said **Noble Greenwald** of Goodbee has been hired as administrative assistant, and he plans to hire at least three more full-time employees.

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