

Sports park to get new ownership !

Several local sports business owners are buying Gateway Sports Park, a 27,000-square-foot indoor basketball, soccer and golf venue at state Route 4 and Stanley Avenue, about five minutes from downtown.

The group is expected to close on the deal March 19.

David Blasik is one of the six partners buying the sports park. He co-owns Let's Play Ball, an indoor batting cage arena in West Carrollton. The group also includes his partners at Let's Play Ball and the owners of Meeks Sporting Goods in Springfield.

Blasik would not disclose the purchase price, but he said the new owners plan to invest more than \$500,000 into Gateway and build additional basketball courts and a 30,000-square-foot indoor baseball field.

"We're going to increase the size of the facility and make it available to more people," Blasik said.

Gateway cost \$1.4 million to build when it opened in 2000. But the park has not been able to create the buzz necessary to become a popular sports destination, said Kathleen Carlson, a partner in local money management firm Parker, Carlson & Johnson Inc., who is selling Gateway. She said the park generates \$300,000 in annual sales but has the potential to bring in more than \$600,000 if properly operated.

When Carlson and her husband started the project, they simply wanted to open a golf driving range. But the city of Dayton stepped forward and offered financial assistance, which grew the project from a small golf facility to a large indoor sports arena. Carlson said neither she nor her husband have the background to operate a sports park, but she believes the new owners will have more success based on their sports backgrounds and existing base of customers. "They can add another layer, or dimension, to the business we didn't have," Carlson said. The group has experience boosting existing sports venues. Blasik and three of his Gateway partners bought Let's Play Ball in 2002 and doubled sales in two years.

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He said they made Let's Play Ball more adult friendly by hiring workers with a great deal of knowledge about baseball, as opposed to high school students who just needed a part-time job. They also focused on customer service, something that many sports venues neglect, Blasik said.

However, he said turning around Gateway will be a different task because part of Gateway's problem is its location, in an industrial area of Old North Dayton.

Another challenge may be the fierce competition for sports dollars, said Don Aselin, executive director of the Rochester, N.Y.-based Sportsplex Operators and Developers Association, which represents 1,100 sports venues across the country.

"In the old days you could build a softball field and people would come, but not today," he said.

Aselin said the key to a successful sports facility is making the most of your offerings. For example, instead of using a basketball court strictly for basketball leagues, successful operators hold basketball clinics and basketball tournaments to keep a steady revenue stream, he said.

Marketing is also important, he said, because public recreation centers have been pushing indoor activities.

Blasik and his partners plan to do more marketing and believe once people get to Gateway, they'll come back.

Blasik also said the new indoor baseball arena will attract youth baseball players and men's and women's softball players.

Carlson said while it's necessary, it's sad to sell Gateway after she and her husband watched it go from a dirt field to reality.

"For us, even though it wasn't the financial bonanza we hoped it would be, it's at a nice level and I think it's going to turn out to be a nice opportunity for the community," she said.

