

Upswing in softball's popularity could ease woes !

Recreational-league softball used to be the hottest sports ticket in town for young adults.

"I can remember the days when if you didn't sign your team up the day that registration opened, you didn't get your team in a league," said Giles Salyer, Park Maintenance Supervisor for the city Park and Recreation Department.

The local softball boom peaked about 15 or 20 years ago, when as many as 150 men's and women's teams played games from May until August at Multi-Sports Complex. But overall softball participation has dropped steadily since then, despite the increased popularity of coed teams.

The numbers bottomed out at 91 teams in 2008, and the decline affected the bottom line at Multi-Sports Complex, the city's eight-diamond ballpark on 18th Avenue South that plays host to most softball activity in the Electric City.

Fewer adult players translated into less revenue from team fees and concessions, and Multi-Sports needed a \$33,906 transfer from the city general fund this year. City Manager Greg Doyon cited that deficit recently when he said the softball complex — along with the Natatorium swimming pool — could be closed if further budget cuts are necessary.

But thanks to a leaner maintenance schedule and an increase in players, there is a good chance that softball could break even at Multi-Sports this fiscal year.

Salyer, who manages the rec-league softball program that opens this week, said a late registration surge boosted participation to an even 100 teams. That includes 16 women's squads, a big increase over last summer.

"That's really good news," said Salyer. "When I made my first budget presentation, I had 68 teams signed up. I projected 90 teams, so we're a little ahead of the game."

The city's budget for Multi-Sports includes \$155,256 for expenses, with maintenance personnel the biggest cost at more than \$60,000. Other big-ticket items include water (\$10,000) and umpires (\$8,000).

But with the leagues playing only four nights this season — Friday games were eliminated — costs should go down for irrigation, mowing and preparation of fields.

~ continued ~



Upswing in softball's popularity could ease woes ! ~ continued ~

With team and player fees generating more than \$61,000, revenue is already ahead of projections. More teams also should mean higher concessions sales, which was budgeted for \$60,000.

Salyer also is optimistic that revenue will increase from rental of the diamonds for weekend tournaments. Poor signups and bad weekend weather last summer limited the number of tournaments that were completed, but prospects are better this year.

"The proposals look good for tournament dates," said Salyer. "The last few years we had a lot of dates, too, but by Wednesday or Thursday the organizers called and said they didn't have enough teams, and they had to pull out."

The city rents the complex to tournament promoters on a sliding scale, based on usage. If a tournament needs four fields, it costs \$300 per day; if all eight diamonds are required, the fee is \$450 per day.

"But we'll work with anybody who wants fields," said Salyer, who said the city will charge the Electric City Heat \$684 in June to use six fields for two days.

The Heat fastpitch tournament for girls' teams annually is the biggest summer event at Multi-Sports, attracting as many as 800 players and twice that many spectators.

Most softball programs in Montana are governed by the Amateur Softball Association (ASA), but a new association is trying to establish a base in the state. Salyer said he got requests from a promoter in Spokane who represents the United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA).

"It's a new group and they use different rules, and he's reserved three weekends," said Salyer. "My interest is getting people to play more softball, whether its **ASA** or any other kind."



Great Falls High and C.M. Russell High use the lower four fields at Multi-Sports Complex for three months each spring. (Tribune File Photo)

