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Fields full of dreams

By ANDREW WIND, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO --- A forlorn backstop and a beat-up scoreboard are all that remain of a former baseball field at Tibbetts Park.

The field's diamond still is evident since weeds have filled in the dirt pathways between bases. The aging fence that once surrounded it was taken down two years ago.

But a new ball field will be taking shape as Build Our Ballpark sets its sights on the patch of ground near West Donald and Cedar Bend streets. The organization, founded by advertising executive Bob Hellman Sr., will be raising money to build the new field and refurbish the infields of the park's two existing fenced ball fields in partnership with Waterloo Leisure Services.

"It would be good for both youth baseball and softball," Jon Olson, Build Our Ballpark's development director, said of the new field. "Starting T-ball would be able to use it and girls' softball, up to seniors in high school."

"We have roughly \$25,000 that we were going to spend toward the fencing," said Mark Gallagher, Leisure Services' sports manager. "Bob and Jon's goal is to raise some money for dugouts and the infield renovation."

He estimates an expense nearing \$100,000 between the new and existing fields.

Gallagher said the city was "fortunate enough to be involved" with Build Our Ballpark's first project at Hellman Field, adjacent to Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence. After completing that last year, Hellman wondered what was next. Gallagher told him the city still doesn't have enough ball fields to meet the demand.

"We lost two fields with the construction of the new McKinstry School, so we're still two to four diamonds short," Gallagher said. "We met with Bob and Jon at Tibbetts Park last fall. Bob was very excited in trying to move that forward."

"We've had wonderful cooperation from some of the service organizations," said Hellman, chairman of the Waterloo marketing and advertising agency named for him. Build Our Ballpark also is applying for grants from organizations like the Black Hawk Gaming Association and the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa.

The organization is actively looking for other support, as well. A business associate of the Hellman family who works for Goldman Sachs in New York City has shown interest in the project. In addition, Hellman has been in touch with the board of Harlem RBI, which develops ball fields in New York, looking for advice and financial aid for his nascent organization.

"Overall, we're still in the infancy of our fund-raising efforts," Hellman said. "Obviously, that's going to be our biggest challenge. In the current economic climate, even tougher."

Build Our Ballpark remains involved with "a little marketing muscle" after a new field is completed, Hellman noted. "It's also the promotion of the venue, it's also the marketing of these fields."

The organization already has been involved with events held at Hellman Field.

"It's about promoting community, too," Olson added. "We'll bring the community together, and that's something that we can't lose focus of."

"Rather, we need to stay involved with the fields we construct, so that we can foster the community."

Contact Andrew Wind

at (319) 291-1507 or

andrew.wind@wfcourier.com.

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This field at Tibbetts Park is the latest project to be taken on by the organization Build Our Ballpark. (BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Staff Photographer)