Tell me about the project.

Spears: It came about because of the relocation of O’Brien County Implement Dealer. They had 2.5 acres of property between us (the high school) and the middle school. When that property became available, 11 total acres, it started discussions about how we develop that. Were there other ideas about what to put in that space?

Wynja: Long-term, from the city perspective, it only made sense that it be something with the school district. They had all the surrounding property; their bus barn was there, their other sports complexes were there. So when we started talking to the school district about what we can do here, we also started a master park and recreation plan.
From there we discussed: what are our needs, what are our demands? The current (baseball field) locations the city used had some big issues: we had a backstop, but not adequate dugouts; we didn’t have an adequate restroom facility; parking was unsafe—it was along a street with parking on both sides. Kids running across the street; it wasn’t a very safe setting.

Now we can use the high school and middle school parking lots. We built new restrooms, concessions and storage facility. We have three baseball or softballs fields with full backstops, dugouts and the whole nine yards. There’s also four acres of green space for soccer or football.

**Who decided which recreation facilities to include?**

*Wynja:* We formed a subcommittee of the school and the city--a few school board members, a couple city council members, Robin and myself. We talked with the parks and rec board about what their needs were, then sat down jointly and started working with an architect and engineer to lay it out.

…There were pretty similar visions from the beginning.

We also both had a target of how much we were willing to spend. So that narrowed things down pretty quickly, too.

**Tell me more about the financial aspects.**

*Spears:* When that property was vacated, the school was very interested in it. We worked with the city, and the property was deeded to the school for a dollar. Then the school purchased the house next door to the land, which was 1.8 acres. That freed up the whole spot.

…The city had money set aside, and we had some money set aside. So we didn’t have much additional revenue to raise. The agreement is that we share the costs of maintaining the facility, which isn’t much.

*Wynja:* We shared 50/50 the costs of construction; 50/50 the costs of operation. It kind of melted down the blow for both sides, instead of one side or the other taking on the project.

Another component and partnership was Northwest Iowa Community College. We utilized their heavy equipment program. They did all the initial dirt work and all the grading, and that probably saved us close to $200,000. They aren’t a partner going forward in the operations, but from the construction standpoint they were a real boost for us.

**How has sharing worked this first spring?**

*Spears:* Not very well. (laugh). The main reason is that last fall when they were getting ready to build the concession stand we had lots of rain. That delay meant the grass areas, like the baseball and softball fields, got seeded a little late and aren’t mature enough yet to play on. But that’s weather, and we just couldn’t get it to cooperate.

*Wynja:* The partnership is excellent, but we haven’t had an opportunity to test it yet. And many events are slated to start this fall.

*Spears:* The city and school have a long relationship of working together. In the 70s they built an indoor swimming pool. We’ve already been sharing school facilities for some city recreation purposes.

…The philosophy of the school district is that if we’re going to the tax payers and ask them for money to not only build but maintain facilities, we ought to make them available for the community to use. So it’s a good fit.

**What is the community response?**

*Wynja:* I think generally out of the gate, we haven’t had much negativity. This is a project that is family-orientated; it’s about kids. The sharing cooperation between the school and the city was huge—from a cost savings standpoint.

Our moto in the city is, “Where Families Come First.” This was a perfect fit and a natural partnership. I think in communities our size, to make projects like this feasible, this is the route we have to take—to create those partnerships, whether public-private or public-public.

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