

LOCAL GEM

Hingham High athletic complex is paying dividends

By Gail Besse Ryberg
correspondent

Now Friday night football games draw families each fall to Hingham High School's lighted turf field. Summer brings adults and youngsters to the school athletic complex to throw a Frisbee, play tennis, run the track or enjoy a pick-up game of soccer or softball.

These are among the benefits of the \$6 million High School Fields Project, a public-private venture completed in 2013 that is evidently paying dividends.

"This project was built by the community for the community," said Warren Pelissier, a former president of HSP, the Hingham Sports Partnership, an independent non-profit that supports all town athletic programs.

HSP raised \$1.1 million in donations and contributed another \$250,000 of its own funds, half down and half pledged over five years. This June, HSP made its final payment of \$25,000 to the town a year early.

Pelissier and Christine Falvey, who just stepped down as HSP president, were among those who six years ago helped bring the athletic complex renovation-expansion into being.

"It's been a win-win for everyone," said Falvey. "It's changed the culture of high school athletics; kids take more pride in it now. And it's brought young and old together and solved a major parking problem for other events at the school."

In addition to sports, other events include Town Meetings, elections, dance recitals, high school graduations, school plays and award ceremonies.

The school was built in 1954. By 2011 its athletic complex needed a major fix and parking for big events was "a nightmare," Falvey said.

The school board, with help from the Hingham Sports Partnership among others, tackled the challenge.

The Fields Project opened four years ago. It expanded parking by 102 spaces to 625.

It added a new artificial turf field to replace the muddy over-used football field, installed lights and a new track, a new concession building and bleacher seating for about 2,000 in total. It made drainage and site improvements and put in new landscaping, and new baseball and softball fields.

"This moved the whole athletic complex farther away from neighbors and created a better



Then football captain Liam McCarthy and athletic director Margaret Conaty lead the sports captains onto the field with a giant red ribbon for the sports complex dedication ceremony on Saturday, September 20, 2014. (WICKED LOCAL STAFF PHOTO BY ROBIN CHAN)

buffer for them, especially for people on Downing Street," Falvey said.

Voters at three town meetings between 2011 and 2013 approved \$4.7 million for the project, said Ray Estes, a former school committee member. This tax override appropriation is being financed over time, mainly with municipal bonds, according to Town Administrator Ted Alexiades.

Estes said the whole project was finished \$165,000 under budget.

Incoming HSP president Fred Hussey sees the turf field and night lights as "a huge benefit" for youngsters. "It gets them out of the house, out playing sports and communicating with each other, not inside gaming."

In the past, neighbors' major objections to expansion plans had centered on lights and to anticipated problems with traffic, noise and parking.

But the old football field, which was close to nearby homes, had drainage problems; infrastructure was failing at the track and the tennis courts were crumbling.

Although surrounding towns were all outfitted with sports fields equipped to play night games,

Hingham had to go to Cohasset to play a game under lights.

The school board realized that an updated athletic complex would only succeed through compromise. Falvey said, "They led the effort and did the heavy lifting."

Though not always unanimous, selectmen and the advisory committee supported the board's efforts, according to Estes. HSP spearheaded outside fundraising.

"This had been a hot button issue for years," said Bill Crean, an HSP board member who was on the ad hoc advisory committee. "But everybody compromised. Even though people felt passionate about it, it was handled in as neighborly way as you could get," he said.

Public forums allowed people to voice their concerns and discuss potential solutions, according to Pelissier.

The plan went through after limits were set on when lights and sound (PA for game announcements) could be used, Estes said. Parking and better traffic flow were addressed.

Granite curbing was installed along Union Street to prevent parking along the road. And landscaping was added to create a vi-

sual and sound buffer.

"The Fields Project brought the town together to create a beautiful final project, a successful public-private partnership and a way to have open discussions with respect," Pelissier said.

With HSP's debt for this project paid off, the group is looking toward the fall, Hussey said.

HSP hopes to implement lessons in "positive coaching" – teaching coaches, parents and students that they can win while still being positive with each other. The group will also look into renovating the high school fitness center, which Hussey said is "in dire need."

HSP was begun by a small group of Hingham parents in 1995. Its goal then was to supplement, but not replace, existing funding for high school booster clubs.

According to its website, the board was particularly focused on assisting women's sports and supporting programs or teams that would give more students a chance to participate in sports.

Over time, its mission has broadened to support all athletic programs. It's now an independent non-profit with an active board of 25 members. The part-

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Warren Pelissier, Hingham Sports Partnershi

nership relies on three annual fundraisers: a fashion show, a comedy night and a golf tournament named after past HSP president Tom "Hoffy" Hoffman, in recognition for his years of community service.

HSP has raised more than \$2 million in grants for athletic needs and scholarships, according to the organization's website, www.hinghamsports.com.

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