

Dream of fields: Soccer activists seek more community facilities  
written by Newspark Team | February 18, 2018



Thousands of youths and adults are on soccer teams in the area and some would like local governments to increase the amount of places to play.

“We started to recognize that what makes soccer so unique in Charlottesville is that it has a lot of unique ingredients,” said David Deaton, executive director of the Charlottesville Alliance FC, an amateur soccer club. The team joined the National Premier Soccer Club earlier this year.

“There’s a tremendous thriving soccer culture because of the University of Virginia and how well it does. You’ve got a lot of graduate students.”

There are almost four dozen fields listed on the website of the Soccer Organization of Charlottesville-Albemarle, a group founded in 1982 to promote the sport.

Matt Wilson, executive director of SOCA, attested to the fact that the Charlottesville area has a prominent soccer community.

“SOCA alone registers approximately 7,300 unique individuals each year with about 1,300 of them being adult players. We take in over 13,000 registrations annually in our various soccer programs,” he said.

However, Wilson said not all fields are created equal.

“Most of the soccer fields listed on [the SOCA] site are simply school fields located at local elementary or middle schools,” Wilson said. “Their quality is often quite poor.”

Deaton has argued before the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors that a lack of multi-purpose fields in the area could hinder this diverse soccer community from growing further. The Charlottesville Alliance FC sometimes resorts to practicing in the basements of local parking garages when winter weather and lack of lighting make it impossible to practice on outdoor fields after dark.

Deaton is hopeful that more multi-purpose fields will spread demand enough that fields won’t suffer from overuse.

“Darden Towe [Park] is probably the largest, most established soccer complex and no adult will play at Darden Towe,” Deaton said. “I can’t even get my guys to go there to practice ... the fields are in such poor shape.”

Dan Rosensweig, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville, is a former executive director of SOCA. He said he would like to expand the inventory of area fields through a combination of lighting some pitches and building more synthetic ones.

“If you light a grass field, you’re going to overuse it and ruin the field,” Rosensweig said. “If you make a nice turf field without light, we’re very much subject to the hours of the day. When the sun goes down at 5:30, right when people are getting off work, nobody can really use the fields that we have.”

Echoing Rosensweig, Wilson said, “one ray of hope is the rise of new synthetic turf fields.”

Though installing brand-new turf fields would be ideal, Wilson thinks it would be difficult to achieve. Instead, he proposes converting existing fields to turf and lighting them. He suggested Darden Towe Park as a potential location for this.

Rosensweig also suggested that area officials consider some “non-traditional” soccer fields.

“All over the world,” he said, “most soccer is not played on gigantic, full-sized fields. Most soccer is played in smaller, contained, usually turfed or harder surfaces inside fences so that kids and adults can play pick-up.”

“As we get more dense as a community, this is a better land use,” Rosensweig added.

Smaller, non-conventional fields also increase access, he said. Players don’t need to pay a lot of money to reserve facilities if there are numerous small fields dispersed across neighborhoods.

Rosensweig said it could even be possible to convert existing and underutilized basketball or tennis courts into multi-purpose spaces for soccer players.

“Any neighborhood could have something like this. It doesn’t take up much space,” he said.

Expanded sports infrastructure presents the opportunity for economic gain through “sports tourism,” Rosensweig said.

Albemarle County is in the midst of a study to establish what residents want from their parks and recreation department. That work could inform future decisions about how to spend taxpayer money on fields and other park amenities.

Albemarle's proposed \$57.7 million capital budget for fiscal year 2019 does not include any funding for new fields. The parks department had submitted a \$ million request to renovate five fields and add three multi-purpose fields but the proposal did not score high enough for funding.

Meanwhile, SOCA is fundraising to build additional fields in the Belvedere community. Phase 1 would see construction of a field house that would include an indoor pitch and training facilities.

"[We're] trying to address some of these very issues," Wilson said.