

## Salinas soccer leagues push for new regional complex.

**By Zachary Stahl | Posted: Thursday, September 25, 2008 12:00 am**

Salinas' numerous soccer leagues, along with some key nonprofit and business leaders, are rallying behind a regional soccer complex that would include an outdoor stadium and nine new fields.

Supporters say the complex would create more open space in park-deprived Salinas, and get more kids involved with soccer instead of gangs.

"There are too many teams and not enough open space in the city," says Hilario Lopez, a spokesman for Salinas Soccer League, the city's biggest soccer group. Lopez's league alone has 140 teams. Other leagues also play in the city; games are often held at schools and in parks.

Soccer is a unifying sport for the county's expansive Latino community, Lopez says. Most Salinas Soccer League teams take the name of players' hometowns in Mexico, such as Santa Catarina, Guanajuato or Cocula, Jalisco. In addition, teams in the Salinas Soccer League are required to take youth teams under their wing, allowing fathers and sons to share the field, Lopez says. "We believe the only way to keep violence down is to keep families together, playing together... in a competitive way but in a friendly way."

All the organized leagues have signed on to support a sports complex that would attract regional and national tournaments, and provide soccer clinics for youth.

"It's more than just the game, it's going to be about building character," says Alfred Diaz-Infante, chief executive officer and president of affordable housing builder CHISPA. Diaz-Infante says the soccer program would be modeled after The First Tee of Monterey County's golf coaching at Twin Creeks Golf Course.

Diaz-Infante is also a board member for Salinas Planning and Research Corporation (SPARC), a nonprofit group that did a preliminary rendering of the complex. The indoor soccer field, stadium and new fields would be located north of existing fields at the corner of Constitution Boulevard and East Laurel Drive. The land in question is owned by Monterey County. But with an estimated \$8 million to \$10 million price tag to build the complex, the project will need some generous donations and grants to become reality.

Diaz-Infante says the planning group is investigating applying for state grants. "I think Salinas has a good opportunity to compete for these funds because we are short on park space," he says. The city has about 2.5 acres of parks per 1,000 residents. The national

standard is 3 acres per 1,000 residents, according to Jim Pia, recreation-park superintendent for Salinas.

Additional money could come from a developer, who could also build sport-oriented retail stores and possibly a hotel for traveling players across the street from the arena, SPARC President Peter Kasavan says. Kasavan says a new nonprofit group, the Salinas Regional Sports Authority, would be formed to manage the complex and coordinate the games.

Although Mayor Dennis Donohue favors the project, County Supervisor Fernando Armenta says some details need to be worked out. Armenta says the county still needs to finish a conceptual plan for its future facilities, and is not yet ready to hand over the land. He says the soccer complex group will make a presentation to the Board of Supervisors within a month. Kasavan hopes the Salinas City Council and county supervisors will sign agreements in support of the sports complex within the next couple months.

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