

**DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES**

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**TO:** Mayor Taylor and Salem City Council

**FROM:** Softball Task Force  
Co-chairs: T.J. Sullivan, Carroll Unruh, Tom Gwynn

**DATE:** March 15, 2007

**SUBJECT: SOFTBALL TASK FORCE REPORT**

The Softball Task Force appointed by Council in October 2006 has concluded the initial phase of its work. From the very first meeting, everyone was committed to determining the right softball management model for Salem that would result in a long-term successful program. While this initial work was a condensed process, it was interactive with all perspectives being explored. The Task Force approached their charge in three phases: The first to learn more about softball locally and nationally, the second to learn about different management models, and the third to determine a recommended operational model for the 2008 season and beyond. The Task Force utilized these goals in formulating their recommendations.

- Softball programs will stabilize and be inclusive, and more participation options will emerge.
- Softball thinking will be forward and included in long-range facility planning, as the City is in the best position to analyze and predict field usage and incorporate new fields in park and school developments.
- The City will reclaim the trust of the local softball players and sponsors, knowing that their efforts given or dollars paid will help offset direct program costs and go back into the Complex and programs.
- Management of the different elements of the overall softball program and facilities will be accomplished utilizing a strategic blend of municipal, non-profit, and business partners.
- The Salem Convention and Visitors Association, local lodging properties, and local businesses will participate with a higher level of confidence in promoting, sponsoring, and servicing tournaments.
- Long-term relationships will be forged and underpinned with ASA and USSSA, as well as other national softball organizations including high school and collegiate governing bodies.
- Salem will continue to compete and be selected for state, regional, and national softball tournaments for adults and youth, as well as for special signature tournaments like Play for the Cure.
- An experienced and stable management team of park and recreation professionals and citizens will build effective long-term partnerships locally, statewide, and nationally.

After due consideration, the Softball Task Force recommends that Salem City Council approve the City Management Model, the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex and programs guidelines, and continuation of the Softball Task Force.

Please join us in extending a thank you to the members of the Task Force, who gave of their valuable time to advise this Council on a future strategy for softball. The Task Force feels that it has fulfilled its primary responsibility, but wants to take a "time out" over the next few months and reconvene in the fall. The purposes will be to assist in the season's evaluation, identify program and facility improvements for 2008, and begin examining the shortage of fields across the city to meet the demands of both youth and adult field sports.

**PARKS OPERATIONS**

Parks Maintenance • Park Partnership  
Volunteer • Parks Planning • Street Trees

**COMMUNITY RESOURCES/ RECREATION**

Human Rights • Neighborhood Support • Youth Prevention • Riverfront Park/Community Events  
Senior Center • Park/Open Space/Street Permits • Social Services • Recreation Programs/Aquatics

**SALEM HOUSING AUTHORITY**

Emergency Housing • Affordable Housing  
Resident Programs • Housing Development

# City of Salem

# Softball Task Force

## PHASE 1 REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex  
2000 USSSA Softball Complex of the Year

Betsy Belshaw  
Chuck Bennett  
Dwane Brenneman  
Jake Bryant  
Dan Clem  
Brent DeHart  
Tom Gwynn  
Terry Kelly  
Kris Knox

Mike Mathisen  
Greg McDonald  
Mike McLaran  
Brad Nanke  
Ken Phillips  
Mike Seaman  
T.J. Sullivan  
Carroll Unruh

Presented to Salem City Council  
March 26, 2007

## INTRODUCTION

It has been 20 years since the City engaged in a dialogue with the community regarding softball. Council agreed at its October 23, 2006, meeting that it would be a prudent course of action to seek the input and guidance of the local citizen softball players, the community, and local businesses. Subsequently Council formed a Softball Task Force to analyze the history and current status of recreational softball play in Salem and to develop recommendations to advise Council on the future strategy for softball.

Council appointed the following individuals to the Softball Task Force, each of whom came to the table with a general knowledge of softball and a different level of specific experience. Members have played or coached adult league and tournament softball, operated food and beverage concessions, coached and operated youth softball teams and tournaments, or provided lodging and hospitality for softball programs and tournaments. Membership also includes those who saw the economic benefits of sports competitions to local business and tourism. This report summarizes the work and resulting recommendations of the Task Force.

- Betsy Belshaw, Salem Parks Foundation
- Chuck Bennett, Cultural and Tourism Promotion Advisory Board
- Duane Brenneman, citizen at-large
- Jake Bryant, Salem Area Lodging Association
- Dan Clem, Salem City Council
- Brent DeHart, Salem City Council
- Tom Gwynn, local player since 1978
- Terry Kelly, West Salem Business Association
- Kris Knox, Play for the Cure Softball Tournament
- Mike Mathisen, Salem Parks and Recreation Advisory Board
- Greg McDonald, ASA Girls Fastpitch
- Mike McLaran, Salem Area Chamber of Commerce
- Brad Nanke, Salem City Council
- Ken Phillips, West Salem High School (added by the Task Force)
- T. J. Sullivan, Salem City Council
- Mike Seaman, Player Advisory Committee
- Carroll Unruh, Premier Services Group
- Staff: Barbara Roberts, Bruce Bolton, Nancy Aiken, Department of Community Services

The Softball Task Force began its work in December 2006. During the course of their work the Task Force learned from the community, the task force members, and the national sanctioning bodies, the following:

- History of softball nationally and locally, and national trends in softball participation.
- Current efforts by the Department of Community Services to bring the 2007 softball season online.
- Current demand for fields for both adult and youth softball, baseball, soccer, and other field sports is greater than the supply.
- Improvements that the adult players would like to have at the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex and with softball programs.
- Successful public softball programs and venues are distinguished by having strong support from the public policy body, support from the local tourism bureau and lodging association, a solid base of volunteers, partnerships with local business, and professional staff.
- Opportunities afforded by being a neutral park and aligning with the two largest national softball groups, United States Speciality Sports Association (USSSA) and the Amateur Softball Association (ASA).

## BACKGROUND

In 1985, the City of Salem completed development of the northern end of Wallace Marine Park. The Wallace Marine Park Sports Complex is a 31-acre site within the 115-acre park. Since its development, the Complex has been considered a high quality venue consisting of five lighted fields for adult and youth softball league and tournament level of play. The facility is coveted among softball players because of its location in a park setting, support facilities, and playability.

Adult softball leagues formed in Salem in 1967, and was a City-sponsored program until 1985. In 1979, the Salem Softball Association was formed and worked with the City to operate the local program until 1986, when the Association entered into an agreement with the City to operate the new Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex. Starting in 1987, and once every five years since, until the fall of 2006, the City has utilized a competitive procurement process to secure a contract operator for the Complex and associated programs.

Over softball's 40-year history, many changes have occurred, including:

- ' Salem has doubled in size and population.
- ' Adult slow pitch softball now has numerous national sanctioning bodies and rules or styles of play.
- ' Demographics of softball have changed with the advent of more senior and coed slow pitch and youth fast pitch.
- ' The four Fairgrounds fields (located in the interior of the horse racetrack) became unavailable in 2001 due to the end of the 25-year lease.
- ' Increased competition from new softball complexes has developed around the state.
- ' Softball as well as other sports competitions (e.g. high school wrestling, track and field, soccer tournaments, etc.) are increasingly recognized for their tourism economic benefit, and the community wants to see that continue and grow.
- ' While Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex has remained a popular venue, it will soon need major rehabilitation and expansion to maintain its appeal.
- ' The demands on the City and School District's ballfields are at an all-time high; the shortage of fields identified by the Ballfield 2020 Task Force in 1996 still exists and is even greater today.

Since 1987, the City has had four different softball contract operators. The performance of those contractors has ebbed and flowed, and, at times with a change in contractors, there have been negative consequences for the local program, supporting businesses, and the relationship with the national sanctioning organizations.

In October 2006, Council concluded that, after 20 years, it was appropriate to seek the advice of the community regarding softball. At its October 23, 2006, meeting the Salem City Council approved these actions: (1) delay a new competitive procurement process for a softball operator; (2) appoint a Softball Task Force to determine a future strategy for softball; and (3) authorize the Department of Community Services with the appropriate funding to operate softball for the 2007 season.

## FINDINGS

The Task Force, from the start, recognized that softball in Salem is a complicated mixture of interests, ranging from those of the individual recreational or competitive adult or youth softball players to those local interests who benefit (e.g. lodging, restaurants, retail, etc.) from having a viable and sustainable program of tournament and league softball play. In addition, the Task Force learned these factors about softball:

### **Changing Softball Demographics**

- ' There are more than 16 million softball players, ages 6 and up, in the United States.
- ' Softball participation trends are somewhat static for adults and increasing for the youth.

### **Importance of National Affiliation**

- ' A strong affiliation and relationship with the national softball sanctioning bodies (e.g. ASA and USSSA) are essential to not only the local league play, but to tournament play as well.
- ' While most softball parks are affiliated with a single national sanctioning body, Salem has elected to maintain a neutral position and purposefully invites a broad spectrum of users to the Complex.
- ' Salem has reemerged as a player in the softball world, having successfully secured national tournaments in 2006, 2007, and 2008.
- ' Affiliation with, and participation in, national tournament bidding pays dividends with additional state and regional tournament assignments.

### **Shortage of Softball Fields**

- ' The loss of the four fields at the Oregon State Fairgrounds has restricted growth in Salem adult softball teams.
- ' The Ballfield 2020 Task Force (1996) found that Salem had a significant shortage of fields to meet the needs of softball, baseball, and soccer. While some new fields have come online, the shortage has actually grown larger with the advent of not only more players and teams, but new sports.
- ' While the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex is considered one of the most desirable parks in the country, the size of tournaments is limited by the number of fields.
- ' Most publically owned softball complexes in the United States (90% according to ASA) are managed by the local park and recreation departments.
- ' Since Salem's Softball Complex opened, complexes have been developed in Hillsboro, Portland, Tualatin, and Clackamas, all of which compete with Salem in drawing tournament teams. Over the past three years, however, increased communication between complex managers has resulted in improved coordination.

### **Local Softball Leagues and Tournaments**

- ' Some of the softball operational challenges at the Complex are a "short" season (April-October), aging infrastructure, maintenance, weather, economic climate, business participation in sponsoring teams and advertising, and a less than desirable reputation for program stability and credibility.
- ' Local players have indicated they want to return to the 1970's level of involvement, not only in their league play but in helping to promote softball and Salem. The local softball players have a lot of pride in the Complex and Salem and want to regain its reputation as the "Softball Capital of the Northwest".
- ' When the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex was built, it seemed reasonable to expect that it could be managed by a contract operator and that the revenue garnered could relieve the general fund of any liability; however, over time that assumption has not materialized.
- ' Over the course of the past years, with more and more sports competitions and events coming to Salem, local business has recognized the economic benefit of such activity. Softball is seen as one of the more highly visible economic tourism events, and its consistent promotion is necessary.

## FUTURE STRATEGY DISCUSSION

The Softball Task Force focused on its charge of advising Council on a future strategy for softball by determining the best management model for the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex and the associated programs. The Task Force considered four models, which are discussed below:

**Private Softball Facility and Program Model** - The softball facilities are constructed and owned by a private company.

Discussion: Privately developed facilities are generally more diverse (softball fields, baseball fields, volleyball courts, tennis courts, etc.) and offer other amenities (restaurant, locker rooms, etc.). Facilities of this type are few in the country, and are generally located in very large metropolitan areas in climates where they can operate almost year-round. This option was dropped from further consideration as not applicable to the current circumstances.

**Contracted Operator Model** - A competitive procurement process is utilized to select a qualified non-profit or for-profit organization to operate and manage the public owned Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex and associated programs under a specified scope of services.

Discussion: This is the model the City has utilized over the past two decades and, in the judgment of the Task Force, is not a viable option. The community's experience with this model has not been consistently productive and created negative disruption of the local programs when the contracted operator either changed or ceased to do business. This model has alienated the local players, who feel no sense of ownership and want their favorite recreational pursuit to be run on a consistent, fair, and equitable basis, as well as seeing that the dollars paid in essence go back into the program and the Complex. Further, national softball organizations' expectations have not been met with this model, because it does not ensure consistent and stable leadership of local leagues and national tournament bidding.

**City Management/Non-Profit Softball Association Model** - The City, utilizing its Parks and Recreation Department, is the general manager of the public softball programs and facilities. However, the City may partner with a local non-profit softball organization to operate the league softball programs or tournaments, and help maintain the fields.

Discussion: This model is unique to each community in which it is found and has been developed over a period of years. Where they exist, such as in Portland, the non-profit softball association tends to affiliate with one national organization and assists with resource development with respect to businesses to sponsor local teams; tournaments, and field improvements. Normally, the softball association does not want to do the day-to-day operational responsibilities of maintenance and programs, but rather helps with funding, securing sponsorships, working with volunteers, and in essence has a value-added role. While partnerships are very good public recreation business, they are best used in a targeted manner to promote the facilities and programs, and not to do the day-to-day program management or facility upgrades and capital improvements. This option was dropped from any further consideration; however, elements of working with non-profit softball associations (e.g. Oregon ASA, Oregon USSSA, etc.) would be imperative to the success of the overall softball program.

**City Management Model** - Utilizing its Parks and Recreation Department, the City is the general manager of the public softball programs and facilities. The general management includes, but is not limited to, day-to-day operation of the facility including a broad array of functions. These functions include maintenance (turf, irrigation, lights, landscape, hard scape, buildings, etc.), field preparation, program coordination and supervision, fiscal accounting, umpires, risk management, contract management, safety and security,

tournament calendaring, and tournament rentals. Where appropriate and capable of capturing funds or achieving a cost savings, the general manager may utilize outside vendors to provide elements of the operation (e.g. food and beverage concessions, advertising sales, equipment and souvenirs, etc.). Integration of the diverse activities needed to operate the Complex and programs involves a highly complex series of tasks applicable to every hour of every day that the Complex is open and play is occurring. The City, in cooperation with the players and the community, can devise long- and short- term strategies to meet the needs of the local players, maximize the positive economic impact of tournaments, and maintain the Complex at a level that maintains its popularity in the “softball scene”.

Discussion: In cities across the United States where the city owns a public softball complex or fields, over 90% are managed by the city directly through its Park and Recreation Department. The Task Force learned that this is the case because of these key factors:

- i** The overall success of a program and complex is dependent on a seamless integration of the key functions of league, tournaments, maintenance, concessions, and marketing, none of which can be done independent of the other.
- i** Softball, be it youth or adult, is a recreational sports pursuit, usually played on public fields. As such, participants want to see revenues which are generated pay for the associated programmatic costs and to improve fields.
- i** Softball fields across the nation and especially here in Salem are in very high demand. A key and very primary role for the City is to act as a fair and impartial “broker” for that field space.
- i** The ability to attract and host state, regional and national level softball tournaments is directly related to the support, commitment, and relationship of the local softball players, state associations, local businesses, lodging properties, and the Parks and Recreation Department.
- i** In the Task Force’s assessment, this model best meets these goals for Salem’s Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex and associated softball programs:
  - T** Softball programs will stabilize and be inclusive, and more participation options will emerge.
  - T** Softball thinking will be forward and included in long-range facility planning, as the City is in the best position to analyze and predict field usage and incorporate new fields in park and school developments.
  - T** The City will reclaim the trust of the local softball players and sponsors, knowing that their efforts given or dollars paid will help offset direct program costs and go back into the Complex and programs.
  - T** Management of the different elements of the overall softball program and facilities will be accomplished utilizing a strategic blend of municipal, non-profit, and business partners.
  - T** The Salem Convention and Visitors Association, local lodging properties, and local businesses will participate with a higher level of confidence in promoting, sponsoring, and servicing tournaments.
  - T** Long-term relationships will be forged and underpinned with ASA and USSSA, as well as other national softball organizations including high school and collegiate governing bodies.
  - T** Salem will continue to compete and be selected for state, regional, and national softball tournaments for adults and youth, as well as for special signature tournaments like Play for the Cure.
  - T** An experienced and stable management team of park and recreation professionals and citizens will build effective long-term partnerships locally, statewide, and nationally.

## RECOMMENDATION

The Softball Task Force, after due study and consideration, recommends that Salem City Council take the following action:

1. Approve the City Management Model for the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex and associated public softball and recreational programs.
2. Approve these guidelines for the Department of Community Services to utilize in managing the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex and associated public softball and recreational programs:
  - First priority for scheduled use will be for weekday adult softball programs.
  - Schedule weekend tournament play or events in such a manner as to attain maximum utilization.
  - Schedule other City and School District 24J ballfields as deemed appropriate by the City to meet the needs of the adult softball league programs and for adult and youth softball tournaments.
  - Generate sufficient revenue to offset direct program costs. Major repairs, capital improvements, and national and regional tournament bids and promotions to be funded with other sources (General Fund, Transient Occupancy Tax Funds, Grant Funds, etc.).
  - Place five percent (5%) of the Complex's gross revenue in the City's Softball Reserve Fund.
  - Utilize a commercial orientation including, but not restricted to, food and beverage including alcohol (beer and wine only), vendors, advertising, and sponsorship signs and banners. The content and display of all sponsorship or advertising materials are subject to approval by the Department of Community Services Director.
  - The hours of operation for the Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex are 5:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight. This requirement may be waived by the Department of Community Services Director.
  - Wallace Marine Park Softball Complex is subject to the requirements in the Parks, Streets, and Public Open Spaces Administrative Rules and Regulations.
3. Approve the Task Force taking a "time out" over the next few months and reconvening in the fall to assist in the season's evaluation, identify program and facility improvements, and to begin examining the shortage of fields across the city to meet the demands of both youth and adult field sports.