

Dream facility a reality

Complex to cater to athletes with special needs

GARY RENNIE
The Windsor Star

AMHERSTBURG It was a day devoted to big dreams and how— sometimes — they come true.

Ivan and Christine Petkovic moved their family here from Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., three years ago because facilities for special needs children like their son Trajan were so much better.

But even the Petkovic family never dreamed they'd someday have access to one of Canada's finest indoor and outdoor sports complexes for children and adults with special needs.

The realization of hopes and dreams going back a decade was a constant theme in speeches as more than 100 community members and politicians gathered Thursday for the groundbreaking of the \$24-million recreation complex in Larry Bauer Park on County Road 18.

The town and its tiny Rotary Club have already won international acclaim for taking on the challenge of building the first Miracle League baseball diamond in Canada.

But the complex will have so many other unique features it seems like the whole town is just busting out in pride over what's going to be built here in the next year.

The two NHL-size ice pads and benches are designed to readily accommodate sledge hockey. The change rooms are all oversized with extra space allotted for wheelchairs when the players are on the ice.

The indoor playing field and walking track will be easily accessible by special needs children and seniors.

A smaller-sized, warm-up rink for hockey and figure skaters is a first for the area. You'd have to go to Toronto to find another.

The premier ball diamond will be the first in this area with artificial turf. A CFL-sized football field — that can also be reconfigured into four soccer fields — will also be the first locally with artificial turf.

Mayor Wayne Hurst saw the recreation complex as an important part of the efforts of all three levels of governments to rebuild a town especially hard-hit by plant closings and unemployment in recent years.

"Things are on the move in Amherstburg," said Hurst.

"Pay attention because there's a lot more to come."

The province and federal governments contributed a total of \$15.7 million in grants, which is unprecedented support for a recreation project. Without those dollars, Hurst bluntly said: "This just could not happen."

Essex MP Jeff Watson and MPP Bruce Crozier both emphasized they were quick to share the town's dreams of a facility that had something for everybody, and knew the project could win support from their colleagues in government.

Watson, who lives in Amherstburg, was enthused about the location near Big Creek. He saw the prospect of building walking trails through the woods and developing the Big Creek wetlands into an International Wildlife Refuge as not unrealistic dreams either.

Ken Grant, chair of the town's recreation committee, said there were times he almost lost hope in the past 10 years of ever seeing significant upgrades or expansion to the town's aging, single-pad arena. The old rink needs a \$750,000 roof, among other deficiencies, but the biggest problem was just not enough ice time, he said.

People like national sledge hockey team member Ray Grassi of Windsor were asked for suggestions to improve the design, Grant said.

The Petkovics, who took part in the



DAN JANISSE/The Windsor Star
Trajan Petkovic, 12, a sledge hockey player, participates in a groundbreaking ceremony.

well.

The Miracle baseball diamond will be the first facility to open, likely next May.

Johnny Franklin of the Georgia-based Miracle Baseball Association came to the groundbreaking to praise the town and its Rotary Club for its leadership.

"Every child deserves a chance to play ball," said Franklin. "Thanks to you that dream will live on."

Rotary Club president Alison Baldwin said she had a hard time talking about the project without getting "very emotional."

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