

(August 27, 2007) Unveil Plans for Valley Forge

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\$5 Million Construction Project Scheduled for Spring 2008

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Plans to build a long-awaited field house at Valley Forge Park were unveiled Saturday morning outside the park at 7001 W. 59th St.

Tim Mitchell, general superintendent of the Chicago Park District, joined Ald. Michael Zalewski (23rd), Cong. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd) and state Rep. Bob Molaro (D-21st) at the Saturday event, along with four local women who saw a need for a field house in 1999 and formed the Valley Forge Park Advisory Council in an effort to get it done.

According to a new sign put up Saturday on the park fence, the \$5 million construction project should begin in spring 2008.

Lipinski was able to get \$2.5 million in federal funding allocated for the project two years ago, and the Park District is supplying the other half of the funds.

But Zalewski said the real force behind the field house project were the four neighborhood women, Donna Gesiakowski, Debbie Seidler, Joyce Caulfield and Ann Corcoran.

"The field house would never have happened if these four committed women didn't consistently ensure that it was a priority," said the alderman. "They demonstrated the need for the structure and their determination is what made this addition to the community possible."

"It's been a while in the works, but if it is worth doing, you stick with it, and it gets done," said the alderman on Tuesday.

He said construction is expected to take nine to 12 months.

Valley Forge is a long, narrow park located on 59th Street between Sayre and Harlem avenues, on the border between Garfield Ridge and Clearing. The Indiana Belt Railroad tracks form its southern boundary.

The Park District obtained the land in the early 1970s and officially opened the park in 1976, naming it after George Washington's military encampment in the Revolutionary War.

According to the Chicago Park District Web site, the park expanded from its original 6.46 acres to 7.74 acres in 1998, allowing for the addition of a soccer field.

Other amenities the park offers include baseball diamonds, basketball and tennis courts, swing sets and walking paths.

However, the only enclosed facility on the property has been a double-wide trailer with barely enough room to accommodate the programs offered there, including summer day camp, preschool activities, and arts and crafts classes.

"People have been asking for a field house there for many years," said Lipinski, who remembers playing Clear-Ridge Little League baseball games at the park in the 1970s, when it was known unofficially as Sayre Park.

"In that area (west of Narragansett), there are no parks with real field houses," said the congressman. The closest parks with field houses are Wentworth and Hale parks, both east of Narragansett.

"It's important for the neighborhood, and I am happy I was able to work with the alderman and Tim Mitchell to bring it this far," said Lipinski.

Seidler, president of the Advisory Council, said she and the other women joined forces when they were all bringing their young children to the park in the 1990s and saw the need for a permanent building.

"Instead of just being complaining neighbors, we decided to work with the Park District and the alderman and everyone to get something done."

She explained that while the park is relatively small, it offers a lot of activities, inside and out.

"We got a new playground there a few years ago, but we still needed a proper field house," said Seidler.

She noted that 120 children regularly attend the summer day camp, "But when it rains, they can't all fit inside" the mobile unit that the field house is replacing.

She said the new facility will solve that problem, since it will have meeting rooms and multipurpose rooms that can be used for everything from senior group meetings to some sports activities.

"Including a full-size gym would have been too expensive, but one of the multi-purpose rooms is supposed to have a ceiling high enough to play indoor volleyball," said Seidler.

Zalewski said the way the field house project is being funded is similar to a project he began last year to replace playground equipment in all the parks in his ward - one per year - by the end of his current term.

He said that each of the projects costs \$400,000, and he pays half out of the annual "menu money," the discretionary funds each ward is allocated for local improvements.

Normandy Park got new equipment last year, Wentworth Park is getting it this year.

"I have three more parks to do," said Zalewski.