



Mark Leyden's new sports complex to focus on youth basketball

BY AL HAMNIK

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MERRILLVILLE | It takes courage and daring in today's troubled economy to start a new business, other than a neighborhood lemonade stand with free refills.

Developer Mark Leyden has always had the moxie of a riverboat gambler and the way he sees it, this is Indiana, right? Basketball is king here.

The Munster native's latest endeavor is The Fieldhouse in Merrillville -- a 53,000-square foot building featuring six contiguous NBA-style courts, locker rooms, concession area, restrooms, a mezzanine level and administrative offices -- an entertainment package Leyden hopes will be as welcome as \$1.50 gas.

"The primary focus of the facility is AAU and youth-type leagues and tournaments. That's the bread and butter -- third-grade up through high school," said Leyden, adding that Valparaiso High has already inquired about holding a summer camp/tournament at the facility.

The new Merrillville site, located in the spacious Ameriplex at The Crossroads near 101st Ave. and Broadway, is scheduled to open in November.

"Kids from Munster, from over the border in the south suburbs, from Valpo, from Crown Point and all the other areas, will come in and play in the leagues," Leyden said. "We'll have tournaments for our own league as well as open tournaments where you'll have folks from Michigan, Ohio, Indianapolis and the Chicago area here for a two- or three-day format."

Merrillville native and former Weber State assistant coach John Stroia is Leyden's general manager.

"It's unique for the area," Stroia said.

Leyden noted there is potential for adult leagues and possibly the Gary Steelheads professional basketball team using the facility, but with a priority of always protecting that "youth experience."

The financially-challenged Steelheads play their home games at the 8,000-seat Gary Genesis Center, where they averaged barely 1,000 fans last season.

"I think it could work for practice but we'd have to change our facility a little bit to accommodate games," Leyden said. "Each court, according to our plan, is designed to hold somewhere around 200 fans.

"So we'd have to look at how we could accommodate 1,000 fans on one court. It can be done, but it's just not in the design right now."

Steelheads CEO Jewell Harris Jr. had planned to tour The Fieldhouse in Merrillville with Leyden on Wednesday afternoon but said no decision on the team's involvement will be made until mid-October.

"It's not just for the ultra player. It's for the kid who wants to play and this will be the place for them," Leyden said. "It's getting tougher and tougher to make the school team. You almost have to be an elite athlete some times."

Revenue would come from league and tournament fees, the gate and concessions.

"There's a really good business plan and a network attached to this concept," Leyden said. "This is the first and there'll be a second one opening Jan. 1 in Bolingbrook. We're affiliated with (The) Spiece (Fieldhouse) in Fort Wayne and the one in Fishers. The plan is to grow this network of facilities across the country."

Additional facilities in Raleigh, N.C.; Overland Park, Kan.; and London, England will break ground in 2009. The Fieldhouse in Merrillville

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Features six NBA-style courts, locker rooms and concession area

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