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PARK DISTRICTS COULD SOLVE PROBLEM OF WHERE TO PLAY JOINT VENTURE WILL CREATE MORE FIELDS FOR YOUTH SPORTS

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As Columbus' municipal boundaries have expanded, suburban and township governments have struggled with putting their tax dollars into parks that may be used equally by Columbus residents.

Officials are finding that school- district boundaries really define the community for young people who attend classes together and want to play in youth-league baseball, softball, soccer and football programs.

New Albany-area officials think they have found the answer -- a park district funded equally by residents of the village, Plain Township and Columbus.

It's one of a dozen established throughout Ohio since a 1930s law created the option.

"Joint park districts help greatly when there is a hodgepodge of governments by allowing a combined effort and funding. That's exactly the purpose of the law," said Harvey Woods of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.

Woods, a consultant with the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association, said a major advantage of such districts is the joint taxation, which eliminates charging higher fees to outside users.

The New Albany Plain Local Joint Parks District was formed in 1999 to maintain and operate parks and recreation programs. Until now, it has not had any money for staff or construction other than private donations.

With the permanent 0.75-mill property tax that voters approved March 7, the park district hopes to have three soccer fields ready to go by fall in Bevelhimer Park and three new ball diamonds there by 2001. Fields in the Swickard Woods and Harlem Road parks will be

improved.

The all-volunteer board, which eventually will number six people, is overseeing the district but hopes eventually to hire at least a part-time director, said Chairman *Keith Karr*, a Columbus lawyer who represents the village on the board.

Money from the tax, which will generate about \$321,000 a year, won't be available until 2001. But the park-district board will borrow against those revenues to start work this year.

"We will try to do everything we can, but we don't want to borrow so much that interest payments will restrict the long-range operation," Jon Yarger said. "This will take time."

Yarger represents New Albany- Plain schools on the board.

Mitchell White, president of the Plain Township Youth League, said the joint district was formed after a yearlong study by representatives of Plain Township, New Albany and New Albany-Plain schools.

"This is a rapidly growing community with a limited number of fields. This summer, we'll have 37 to 40 baseball and softball teams and only five fields. It's a real trick in scheduling," White said.

He said soccer and football leagues face similar difficulties.

"This fall the need will be very critical," said Rick Aronhalt, facilities coordinator for the school district.

"We have had soccer practices in the outfield of our ball diamonds at the school. The only lighted field is the high-school football stadium. There aren't enough places to play, and we could not schedule any more games."

"It was a great relief for the village when the levy was approved," New Albany Mayor Colleen Briscoe said.

The village does not have a recreation and parks department, although one probably will be formed because of the smaller parks and bike trails being built by developers such as the New Albany Co. These areas currently are being maintained by homeowners' associations.

Yarger said the park board will spend \$180,000-\$190,000 this year on capital improvements and \$20,000 for planning.

Karr said Myers-Schmalenberger, Columbus landscape architects, are preparing a development plan to assure that tax money is used wisely.

Yarger and Karr said the board also will seek donations from individuals and companies.

Plain Township is represented on the board by resident Stan Harris.

The village, township and school district will each appoint an additional member to replace three elected officials who helped in the early stages but stepped down to avoid any conflict of interest over spending the new tax dollars.

Illustration: Map appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: Map