

# Orange County hits goal with expansion of Efland soccer complex

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Soccer.com drawing teams, fans from around the nation and the world

Commissioners approve spending \$755,000 for 37 acres, doubling center's size

Expanded complex could attract hotels, restaurants and larger sporting events



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EFLAND — Attendance at the Soccer.com Center events has quadrupled in five years, making the Orange County complex a regional, national and international soccer destination.

County officials predict even greater success for the 40-acre complex once a planned expansion nearly doubles the available fields.

“I think as a five-field complex, we are a very desirable location,” said David Stancil, director of the county’s Environment, Agriculture, Parks and Recreation Department. “As a nine-field complex, we’re going to be considerably more.”

“We’ve learned that we’re one of the few gated, Bermuda grass complexes around. We didn’t realize just what we had for a while,” he said.

The U.S. Under-20 Women’s National Team has joined a growing list of teams choosing the venue. The team was looking for a quiet facility where players could practice, said Rich Shaw, the county’s land conservation manager.

“Indirectly, it’s helpful, because the fact that they came here to work out is pretty cool,” Shaw said. “It’s a nice enough facility and protected enough that they felt comfortable working out here for several days.”

The team will wrap up its weeklong practice Thursday in preparation for the November 2016 FIFA U-20 Women’s World Cup, scheduled for Papua, New Guinea. On Monday, they scrimmaged with Carolina Railhawks Women’s College Elite Team.

The Soccer.com Center, tucked away off West Ten Road beside Gravelly Hill Middle School, is about two miles from Interstates 85/40 and four miles west of Hillsborough. The Orange County Board of Commissioners approved a \$755,000 deal this month for 37 more acres.

The purchase from S.L. Efland Heirs LLC could be finalized by July 31 and funded with \$425,000 in debt financing and \$330,000 from the county’s Lands Legacy program, which has protected more than 3,000 acres since 2000, using a mix of local partnerships and county, state and federal dollars.

## **Staying busy**

Soccer.com opened in 2009, growing its annual attendance from 12,000 in 2011 to 50,000 last year. The fields stay busy from March to June and August to October, Stancil said.

The complex also offers a half-mile walking track and a full-service concession stand that brought in more than \$40,000 last year.

The county charges Soccer.com \$35,000 a year to have its name on the center and earns another \$45,000 in field fees. Stancil said that doesn't include the money from hosting top national and international high school players at the College Soccer Showcase Series.

"It's one of those opportunities to be seen if you want recruiters to take a look at you and get on their radar," he said. "That showcase event is a big deal for them. There's several sites across the Triangle where that happens, and we're one of them."

The extra land could provide room for up to four more fields, Shaw said, plus new restrooms and 250 parking spaces. There are 108 parking spaces now and access to 120 more at the middle school.

The county has budgeted \$5.3 million for the five-year expansion and stormwater improvements, including a pond to collect rainwater for irrigation.

## **Adding events**

The Triangle United Soccer Association, one of the first clubs to use the fields, holds practices and games on Wednesdays and weekends. They also host five big events every year, including tournaments, festivals and a Fall Classic in late August, soccer director John Cirillo said.

Many events, including state competitions, require facilities with between six and eight fields, Cirillo said.

"(More fields) could be a pretty big impact for us, because we are going to be adding events to what we do, and having a bigger facility obviously opens up all kinds of opportunities," he said.

County leaders also expect the expansion to bring hotels and business to the surrounding Buckhorn Economic Development District. The county had economic development in mind when it sited the complex, Commissioner Barry Jacobs said.

The showcase alone attracted 13,000 visitors and an estimated \$777,884 in revenues last fall for hotels, restaurants and local retailers, said Marlene Barbera, sales director for the Chapel Hill-Orange County Visitors Bureau. Hotels closer to the complex, with rooms at affordable rates, would be helpful, she said.

The county has gotten interest from some "fairly significant hotel chains," Commissioners Chairman Earl McKee said.