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Wilmette's Roemer Park to undergo renovations

Wilmette's Roemer Park is gearing up for some major renovation to restore its shine. Built in 1953, the historic baseball field has been heavily used by thousands of local Little League teams, some that once included Bill Murray, as well as White House Chief of Staff Rahm Immanuel, author Scott Turow and restaurateur Charlie Trotter, according to the Wilmette Baseball Association, a nonprofit group that provides Little League programs for boys and girls 7 to 18.

From April to July of each year, more than 1,000 children step up to the plate at Roemer. The park sees more activity in one season than Wrigley Field or U.S. Cellular Field combined.

"There are typically 181 games played at Roemer during the baseball season," said Sid Tepps, commissioner of the Wilmette Baseball Association.

The Chicago Cubs and the Chicago White Sox each host about 80 games per season.

"Over the past 57 years, an estimated 50,000 boys and girls have played at Roemer Park," Tepps said.

The wear and tear has taken its toll on the park, a 2-acre field at 2716 Old Glenview Road in west Wilmette. The concession stand is crumbling, the dugouts are rotting and the fences are rusting.

The Wilmette Baseball Association has raised approximately \$250,000 of the estimated \$600,000 it will cost to renovate Roemer Park.

Approved by the Wilmette Village Board in March 2009, restoration plans include rehabbing the concession stand, dugouts, storage facilities and fencing, while maintaining the authentic look and feel of the historic park. A new scoreboard and shed will also be constructed in center field. The field, parking lot and surrounding areas will also be re-graded to improve drainage.

"Our goal is to break ground in August 2010 and have completion by opening day in April 2011," said John Kann, WBA-Roemer Park fundraising coordinator. "Our fundraising efforts continue to ensure that we begin construction this year."



Roemer Park, nestled in a residential neighborhood in west Wilmette, hosts Wilmette Baseball Association games.

Photos submitted by Wilmette Baseball Association



Roemer Park opened for baseball games in 1953.

As part of the fundraising campaign, donors can purchase personalized bricks and granite pavers to be placed in a new walkway and in recognition diamonds on the field. A Hall of Fame monument will also showcase the names of all who have helped secure Roemer's place in the community.

In considering whether the field is worth renovating, the Wilmette Baseball Association has stood behind its continued support of Roemer Park.

"Aside from practical reasons for the renovation, there is innumerable value in what the park brings to the community," Tepps

said. "It is a gathering place, a tangible connection to the solid community foundation that built it, and to the generations that will enjoy it for years to come. Just as we believe Wilmette baseball is the standard for all Little League organizations, Roemer Park is the standard that all Little League parks should be judged from."

For many, Roemer Park is more than just a baseball field in need of repair. Fans and players know it as a place to find Roemer dogs, snow cones, the hand-operated scoreboard with its little red wagon full of metal numbers, the sandbox and the wood

dugout. It can only be reached by a driveway tucked between two houses.

Bob Sirrott, broadcaster and signature voice for WGN-AM, described Roemer Park in one of his TV segments as "easy to miss, camouflaged by surrounding houses and trees. When you do find it, it seems to appear out of nowhere. It's a place frozen in time. The scoreboard is still kept by hand, using metal numbers hauled in a radio flyer wagon by a neighborhood kid who can't wait to get paid with a free snow cone."

Roemer Park was built from old farm materials and the labor and spirit of the entire Wilmette community. It sits on what was once a 100-acre farm owned by Lawrence Roemer, a DePaul professor of history and philosophy, and his uncle Simon Roemer. Former Chicago White Sox player John Bordes led the newly organized Wilmette Baseball Association to initiate the area's first Little League baseball, including asking the White Sox to donate uniforms and equipment.

The first Little League game was played at Roemer Park on June 14, 1953, and the opening ceremony was attended by Whispering Joe Wilson, the first television announcer for the Chicago Cubs.

"While hundreds of volunteers have been instrumental in building and keeping the park open, in recent years it has been the responsibility and the love of the Carpenter family, especially Bonnie Carpenter, for which, she gets our great appreciation and thanks," Tepps said. "But now it is up to the residents of the Wilmette community to step up and ensure that the legacy of Roemer Park continues for future generations."

Roemer Park opened for another season of Little League baseball in early April. For more information about the renovation project, go to www.roemerpark.org, call John Kann 847-294-0000, ext. 35 or e-mail him at jkann@lindengrouphealth.com.

—This story was submitted by Sandy Culver, a freelance writer for the Wilmette Baseball Association