

Feds, province, city pledge over \$15M for field house project

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Amelia Albert pulls a friend under the parachute as kids play behind the YMCA.

Photo: Chris Donovan/Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN • The federal and provincial governments announced Tuesday they are contributing \$12 million to the Greater Saint John Field House project to be completed in 2019, which they hope will attract national-level sports tourism to the Port City.

The structure will be built at Exhibition Park on McAllister Drive and will include a 200-metre indoor track, two indoor turf fields, fitness rooms, multi-purpose areas and outdoor trails. It will be the only facility of

its kind in Southern New Brunswick, according to a press release.

The City of Saint John is also committed to spending \$4.2 million on the project over the next three years. Construction on phase one, the field house, is expected to start between December 2017 and January 2018. The expected completion date is fall 2019. Phase two of the project will include a two pad ice arena, according to the project's website. Construction and expected completion plans for phase two are not available at this time.

Shilo Boucher, president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Saint John, said the facility is a game-changer for both recreational and educational programming for her organization. It will operate the Greater Saint John Field House.

"It's indoor sports, it's something different that we can't do in this facility," she said, adding the indoor aspect means the sky is the limit when it comes to programming. "It's going to give [athletes] more opportunity to do the things that they love ... when it rains here and they can't use the fields, they can just be like 'come on, we're going to the field house.'"

The YMCA of Greater Saint John runs over 141 programs that are accessed by every age and income bracket in the city. Boucher reiterated that the indoor facility would allow for local sports groups, such as soccer and track and field, to have longer seasons.

The project was originally proposed by the Exhibition Park Association in 2007. Bill MacMackin, president of the Greater Saint John Field House Inc., has been involved with the project for four and a half years and was extensively credited with the project's success.

Including this funding, MacMackin said the project has acquired \$23 million. The project still needs \$2 million, but MacMackin is confident he can raise the money through their corporate sponsorship program.

"What we want to do now is shortly move into construction design," MacMackin said, adding they are at the end of the schematic design process now. "This is an opportunity to attract people to the city and hold people here that maybe would go elsewhere."

MacMackin said he is already looking at planning national-level athletic events at the facility. He said announcements would be made within the coming months.

"We have a couple of events we're going to be announcing soon," he said, adding that he's working with the track and field community nationally. "Now that we have this funding in place and can look forward to a construction start date, we hope to announce some national championship events and things very soon."

Saint John Mayor Don Darling said citizens often ask for recreation facilities when surveyed. He said it fits in the city's priority of a healthy, vibrant city and hopes it will be an asset to those considering moving to the city.

"On a number of fronts, we're excited about this," he said via telephone. "It speaks to the quality of life ... [citizens] need to live and work and play."

"You know, I don't believe that this field house is going to necessarily be the single item that turns our population decline around, but it'll be an asset - something that we can point to, that we can add to a long list of other benefits to living in the city," he said.

Saint John-Rothesay MP Wayne Long said the field house will be one of a kind east of Montreal. Long started meeting with MacMackin when he first was elected MP in 2015 and said the project fits exactly into the Trudeau government's infrastructure plan.

"We'll look back at this announcement 10, 15, 20 years from now and remember this day," he said, adding it's great for the cultural fabric of the area. "[The federal government's infrastructure plan is] about more than investing dollars to build buildings and roads, it's about bringing needed facilities to regions that can benefit from [them]."

Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour Minister Donald Arseneault, who is also the minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, said the project is a win-win for the area as well as the province.

"We want to invest in the economy and make communities grow," he said. "This is important for the community."

Rothesay Mayor Nancy Grant said she is happy about the announcement and says they are a regional partner. Four years ago Rothesay had thought about building a similar facility, but scrapped the idea when they realized they could not afford it. Instead, they are planning on building a new ice rink and turning the old one into a community wellness centre.

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