

Hatfield fitness trail project taking shape: www.tmnews.com

IU Health Bedford supporting plan

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3/2/2013

MITCHELL — Soon, Hatfield Elementary School will see its long-awaited dream of having a nature/fitness trail come to life.

In January, the school board gave the administrators at the primary grade school permission to pursue plans to create a quarter-mile asphalt trail that will circle the school's two playgrounds, north of the school. The plan would also add trees, shrubs, ornamental grasses, an outdoor classroom, a pond and other natural, science-related stations to engage the children in education while promoting physical activity.

But creating such an environment on the mostly vacant two-acre spot of land comes with a hefty price tag. With an estimated cost of about \$26,000, organizers at Hatfield knew it would take volunteers and a big commitment from the community.

"We knew the trail had to be first, and since it's probably the most expensive part of the project, we wanted to get it created to show our level of commitment to making this happen," said Hatfield Principal Rex Meyer.

What organizers didn't know, however, is that Indiana University Health Bedford Hospital would step in, not only covering the entire cost of installing the asphalt trail this year, but committing two years' worth of volunteer hours to the completion of the project. That bit of news pushed the project to the front burner.

"One of our top priorities is to decrease the percentage of obese or overweight children through school-based strategies," said Tina McCormick, director of marketing for IU Health Bedford. "This (project) fits perfectly with our priority. We are very excited at what this trail will be for the community. It will provide outdoor exercise, recreation and additional learning for children and their families."

Community partners — Dave Kissel, a landscape architect with Kissel Consultants of Williams; Whitney Baldwin of the Lawrence County Soil and Water Conservation District; Carroll Ritter of the Sycamore Land Trust, who has helped construct nature areas for North Lawrence Community Schools; Dave Redman, an educator with Purdue Extension Service; Heidi Myers, president of the Burris-Hatfield Parent Teacher Organization; and the staff at IU Health — helped develop a plan that incorporates the natural landscape of the area, while providing a suitable fitness and educational environment.

"We're getting many people involved, but we know it's going to take many people to get this done," Meyer said. "We also want to allow the kids to take ownership of it, by allowing them to be involved with the creation and upkeep of the project. We know it's going to be a long-term project, and we know it won't happen overnight, but we also know it's going to be a piece of nature education our students won't get anywhere else."

The plan is to have the asphalt trail installed next month. Aside from the trail, the first phase of the project will also include planting shade trees and the creation of natural play areas. The second phase will include fitness equipment, a garden and an outdoor classroom. The final phase will complete plantings, add signage and finalize an interpretive brochure. The entire design will incorporate the two existing playgrounds.

"It'll be a great place for children and adults, alike," said Andrea Waldbieser, counselor at Hatfield. "But we're going to need the community's help getting it finished. Anyone who wants to take an active role in the creation of the trail is welcome to contact the school."

In the end, Meyer hopes to have the trail open to the public during the evening hours throughout the school year, allowing community members to walk, run and enjoy the trail as well.

"The goal is to definitely make this a community project everyone can enjoy," Meyer said.

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