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Clearwater expected to approve spending to upgrade Philadelphia Phillies' spring training complex

By Drew Harwell, Times Staff Writer

Clearwater is expected to pay \$2.9 million to renovate the team's training complex.

CLEARWATER - Despite a shrinking budget and cuts to parks and playgrounds, the city will likely pay \$2.9 million to upgrade the Philadelphia Phillies' spring training complex.

The renovation would bring new batting tunnels, an expansive gym and a video room to the Carpenter Complex, where the Phillies train, and new batting tunnels to Bright House Field, where they play their spring games.

The team would pay back an estimated \$900,000 over the remaining 12 years of its contract with Clearwater, the Phillies' Florida home since 1947.

City Council members are expected to approve the expenditure during their meeting Thursday night.

City leaders call the renovation cost a smart subsidy considering the tens of millions of dollars Phillies fans spend every year at local restaurants and hotels. The team pays \$200,000 a year to lease the city-owned Carpenter Complex off Drew Street and U.S. 19.

"For a first-class facility, you have to spend money," Vice Mayor George Cretekos said. "I look at this as an investment back in the community."

Money to pay for the new amenities would come from the city's \$18 million "rainy day" fund. Discussion about the project comes two months after the council approved a tightened budget which eliminated 28 jobs, including fire lieutenants and police dispatchers.

It also comes amid the city's demolition, continuing through 2019, of 14 neighborhood playgrounds due to age and lack of funding. Replacing those playgrounds, at \$75,000 each, would have totaled about a third of the \$2.9 million the city plans to spend on the Phillies project.

Parks and Recreation director Kevin Dunbar said the city continues to invest in playgrounds, like those at the Ross Norton Recreation Complex and the Long Center.

He added that the Carpenter Complex presents its own public benefit, as spring training attendance has grown to an average of 10,000 tickets per game.

Mayor Frank Hibbard defended the expenditure as support for one of the city's most visible economic engines. "I guess it's a question of whether you want to be in the Major League Baseball business or not," Hibbard said. "We

want to keep baseball here."

Like most of baseball's public-private partnerships, the Phillies' Florida base has been supported for decades by taxpayer funds. Built on 30 acres of old landfill, the four-field Carpenter Complex was opened in 1967 and funded by \$300,000 of city money.

When the Phillies began to outgrow Jack Russell Stadium, where the team used to play, the city invested \$3.2 million toward the construction of \$34 million Bright House Field. It opened next to the Carpenter Complex in 2004. In recent years the city spent \$3.2 million on other renovations at the complex.

Last year, Dunbar said, Phillies leaders began meeting with city officials about upgrading the complex. The batting cages, they said, had proven too small, and the weight room lacked bathrooms and running water.

Plans show the \$2.9 million would help build a 20,000-square-foot training center with six air-conditioned batting tunnels, a weight- and cardio training gym, locker rooms, office space and a staging and video room. New batting tunnels also would be built beneath Bright House Field.

The Phillies will pay for any cost overruns and manage the construction, beginning in May. The facilities will be open to major- and minor-league players by spring 2013.

The Phillies will fund their share of the cost by giving the city 60 cents of each spring training ticket - tickets cost between \$10 and \$30 - until the 2023 season. Attendance records, Dunbar said, show the city will receive about \$75,000 a year.

There are no promises that the team will continue to train here after that season, and council member Paul Gibson said "We're going to look pretty dumb" if the lease is not renewed.

But Cretekos called the Phillies' involvement here one of the city's biggest points of pride and one worthy of a sizeable investment.

"A lot of times we have this feeling that a sports franchise is out to make money for itself. And most of them, obviously, that's what they want to do," Cretekos said. "But (the Phillies) are like a family organization. Their involvement and commitment to Clearwater is genuine."

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