

Lee County set to improve Twins' spring training home

By PETE BISHOP

Monday, November 14, 2011

With the Boston Red Sox' new \$85 million JetBlue Park complex nearing completion, Lee County officials are turning their attention to improving the other county stadium housing Major League Baseball spring training.

County commissioners will consider hiring a firm to study possible improvements to the Lee County Sports Complex/Hammond Stadium during today's morning meeting.

The 80-acre stadium complex on Six Mile Cypress Parkway in Fort Myers is home to Minnesota Twins spring training and to the Fort Myers Miracle, the Twins' Class A minor league team.

"We don't know what improvements are needed, which is why we're doing the comparison with other facilities," said Jeff Mielke, executive director of the Lee County Sports Authority.

The Twins moved to Hammond Stadium, which seats 7,500, in 1991.

Built at a cost of \$18 million, the complex needs upgrades to remain competitive with other venues, Mielke said.

The \$250,000 agreement commissioners will consider calls for design firm Populous to examine the stadium's aging infrastructure as well as compare its player and fan amenities to those found at newer stadiums in Arizona and Florida.

"Part of the study will address the Twins' priorities in shaping the new site, whether is from a revenue or competitive standpoint as far as player development," Mielke said.

"You don't see any stadiums with five practice fields anymore," he said. "We were supposed to have five practice fields there 20 years ago, but had to go short because of parking."

Mielke said improvements could also include updated clubhouses with equipment such as hydrotherapy spas, or additional space for a team retail store.

The county's contract with the Twins, which runs through 2020, requires the county to evaluate the stadium every five years in comparison to the five newest spring training complexes.

The county purchased 14 acres adjacent to the stadium last summer, in anticipation of improvements.

Dave St. Peter, president of the Minnesota Twins, did not identify specific shortcomings of Hammond Stadium but said it is time for an upgrade.

"The facility has been a wonderful success story, but the reality is it's 20 years old," he said. "We'd like to see a stadium that is not only viable, but a state-of-the-art complex over the next 20 or 30 years."

St. Peter said some of his concerns are related to the stadium's infrastructure, the fans' experience at the game and player development.

"We want to do what we can to ensure it will meet our needs for the minor league team, for spring training, and for year-around training and rehab," he said. "We'll look at all these filters and determine the best course the study is to help inform all of us."

Commissioners authorized negotiations with Populous in October. Based in Kansas City, Populous has designed or designed improvements for at least 17 major and minor league baseball parks across the country, including Busch Stadium in St. Louis, Camden Yards in Baltimore and Yankee Stadium in New York City.

The firm also designed JetBlue Park off Daniels Parkway.

This morning, commissioners will also consider waiving a rule that would prohibit Populous from working on both the present study and on project design once the study is completed.

Waiving the rule will allow Populous to bid on designing any project that emerges from its study, said Damon Grant, Lee construction and design manager.

"There's only a small handful of very qualified ballpark designers in the country, and Populous is one of them," Grant said. "There's a potential cost or time savings if they did the work, but we will be putting this back out to bid."

