LANE TECH TO RAISE $150,000 TO RESTORE ATHLETIC FIELDS, CPS TO MATCH IT
PARENTS STILL AIM FOR $4M FOR EXPANSION, REPLACEMENT OF FIELDS

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Lane Tech High School expects to receive at least $300,000 in public and private funds to restore athletic properties at the school, according to school representatives. Under an agreement reached between Lane Tech and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) on Sept. 27, the school plans to raise $150,000 and CPS agrees to contribute a matching amount to upgrade baseball fields at the school.

The CPS funding commitment results from community pressure to address and resolve concerns regarding deteriorating athletic facilities at the school. The decision reverses earlier statements from CPS officials that budget constraints prohibit spending on major renovations to athletic facilities at Lane Tech. A late-August protest march of about 200 parents and other school supporters to Ald. Gene Schulter’s (47th) office prompted several negotiation meetings between CPS top officials, including CEO Arne Duncan, and Lane Tech’s Fields of Dreams Committee, which organized the protest.

To change the status quo, the committee plans to raise $150,000 in funds by contacting state representatives and private donor sources. He said that although the $300,000 would maintain the baseball field and update basic safety issues, an estimated $4 million would completely renovate the baseball field and the football stadium, including new sod and turf. The committee plans to continue negotiations with the Chicago Board of Education and the Chicago Park District to develop a 6.5 acre property at Rockwell and Addison streets for new athletic facilities, including baseball and football fields for Lane Tech, which currently shares the facilities with several North Side schools. (See sidebar.) Mike Ulreich, vice chairman of the Fields of Dreams Committee, confirmed that condominiums will not be built on the property as the community feared. He said the committee plans to pursue private donations for the total renovation project from foundations run by the National Football League and the Chicago Cubs.

"I think our kids are deserving of much better facilities than they currently have. They deserve more than what the Board of Education is providing for them," said Rich Rio, athletic director at Lane Tech for 10 years. "It really is the responsibility of the Board to do that for us. Any way that that gets done is great because our kids deserve it." The athletic properties have been deteriorating since the 1960s, Rio said. The deteriorating conditions at the field threaten the health and safety of students and visitors due to dust, dirt and cinders, according to Rio.

Ulreich said that he and Rio formed the committee last June because the Board of Education threatened to close the football field and because the state prevented the school from hosting the baseball championship games due to safety concerns. Ulreich, a past chairman of the Local School Council, said Lane Tech’s athletic teams practice at nearby public parks. He said that the protest was organized after repeated requests to Ald. Schulter’s office failed to produce action on the issue.

Lane Tech is the largest high school in Illinois, with about 4,500 students. Despite deferred maintenance of athletic facilities, the school is a top performer athletically. The school won 10 city championships in both the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years for boys’ and girls’ sports teams. In addition, as a magnet school, Lane Tech performs well academically. According to the most recent statistics, 84 percent of Lane Tech students graduate, with 90 percent of those attending college. (In 2004, the Illinois Board of Education measured the CPS graduation rate at 70 percent, with...
published reports indicating that less than half those graduates go on to college.)

"We've been doing everything right except attracting the money we deserve for our sports field," said Ulreich. "It's time that changed." CPS documents indicate that under a capital improvement initiative launched in 1996, 16 athletic fields have been renovated throughout the city. According to the documents, Lane Tech received millions of dollars from 1996-2004 to improve infrastructure for the school itself, but CPS spent only $5,000 for athletic facilities at Lane during those years, in 2001 specifically.

Calvin Davis, CPS Director of Sports Administration, acknowledged the need for ongoing negotiations about funding between Lane Tech and CPS for improvements for athletic facilities. "It's something that has to take place over time," Davis said.

Yet, Lane Tech representatives did not place blame for the fact that budget allocations overlooked the school's athletic facilities. "It's really not their fault. It hasn't been a priority for them, and as far as a community we haven't said a word about it," said Ulreich. "It's a case of the squeaky wheel getting the grease. We've been damn squeaky the last few months, and we're finally seeing the results."