

Foundation offers millions for soccer fields

MORE FOR PARKS: Rasmuson money requires matching funds from the city plus volunteer work.

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The Rasmuson Foundation plans to give \$6 million to rebuild Anchorage soccer fields as part of an unprecedented donation toward local parks.

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The money has some strings attached, but it's a boon to the growing number of soccer players and parents in the city.

Why so much money for this one sport?

Local soccer groups did their homework, demonstrating that Anchorage doesn't have enough fields and that the ones we do have are hard and dangerous from over-use, said Jeff Clarke, vice president of the foundation.

"They're unsafe. That's really what it comes down to," he said. To underscore the point Tuesday, foundation board chairman Ed Rasmuson announced the donations standing before a torn soccer net on a patchy field in northeast Anchorage.

Along with the soccer money, the foundation is giving an additional \$2.3 million toward programs that hire teens to work in city parks, to buy supplies for volunteers who want to make repairs in their neighborhoods, and to clean trails, among other projects.

The money will go to the fledgling Anchorage Park Foundation -- a kind of parks booster group that organizes volunteers and collects tax-deductible donations and is run by a city employee.

The Rasmuson awards announced Tuesday include seed money for the Park Foundation, which the city created in 2004 after voters defeated a string of parks bonds -- refusing to pay higher taxes for projects.

Rasmuson Foundation president Diane Kaplan said the charity's board believed people would be willing to support parks in other ways, which is one reason the grants hinge in part on the Park Foundation getting people to donate their money and time.

But the big string is, the Park Foundation has to raise matching money from private donors in order to get much of the Rasmuson cash. The city will need to kick in public money too, including about \$4 million for the soccer fields.

Mayor Mark Begich said the city already has roughly \$1.2 million of that from a recent park bond and will probably issue more bonds to get the rest.

Meantime, the Park Foundation will be hitting up local soccer fans and park lovers to donate money and time so it can lock down the Rasmuson money over the next few years.

Dave Parish is a member of the Anchorage District Soccer Federation and coaches young players. Unlike, say, Kenai or Fairbanks, Alaska's largest city doesn't have enough quality soccer fields in one place to host state tournaments, he said. "Our fields are substandard, over-used and under-maintained for the growth in our community."

The \$6 million soccer money will be split among three types of fields throughout the city -- fields used mainly for practice, fields used for local competitions, and fields that could be used for large tournaments such as regional meets or the state cup.

Before Tuesday, the most the Rasmuson Foundation had ever given to a parks and rec project was a roughly \$1.2 million award in 2005 for an aquatic center in Petersburg, Clarke said.

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By the numbers

- **\$8.3 MILLION:** Amount the Rasmuson Foundation is giving to improve local parks.
- **\$6 MILLION:** Amount that will go toward city-owned soccer fields.
- **\$4 MILLION:** Roughly how much the city will need to contribute as matching funds for the soccer upgrades.

AT A GLANCE

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