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Kids first

South Loop field house starts with kids' area

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A rendering of the first floor kids' play area in Park 550, aka the South Loop fieldhouse. Farr Associates

Park 550 is starting to take shape.

The first phase of the three-part project that would convert the building at 1801 S. Indiana into a park district field house will see development of a children's area over an L-shaped platform on the east side of the building's first floor.

The children's area would be designed for kids no older than 5, and include a fall zone with soft surface, games like tic-tac-toe and a even a small climbing wall, South Loop residents were told at a meeting about the project last Tuesday evening.

Plans for the first floor include stroller parking, apparently a nod to the number of families with young children living in the neighborhood.

On the west side of the first floor will be multipurpose rooms that would be available to rent.

The building's main foyer would remain the same, and include Café Society, which signed a two-year lease with the park district to continue occupying the spaces facing 18th Street.

Several windows on the first floor of the building facing Indiana Avenue and the courtyard between the building and Glessner House next door are expected to be uncovered during renovations.

Total cost of the first phase is estimated at \$800,000, according to park district project manager Bob Foster.

The second floor of the building will be a fitness center equipped with typical equipment, Foster said. There will also be a dance space/yoga studio and additional multipurpose rooms.

On the third floor, a large meeting room for community events is expected.

Work on the upper floors, however, is not expected to begin for some time, and Foster said at Tuesday's meeting the park district isn't certain when future construction phases will begin.

The National Vietnam Veteran's Museum, which used the building starting in 1996, has moved to the building's third floor and has a three-year lease for the space.

The museum would remain open during the building's hours.

Residents at Tuesday's meeting peppered district staff about field house operations — from whether dogs would be allowed in the building, to hours and security, to how the various spaces would be programmed — but few decisions about such policy have been made.

Harold Bailey, an area manager for the park district, took names at the end of the session of residents interested in joining committees to answer some of those questions.

Foster said the second floor could host a pre-teen and teenager's club, offering after school activities for students too old to run around in the children's area.

The park district will also gain control of Women's Park, located behind the facility, and plans are now to keep the space as a passive park.

The plans appeared to be fairly well received by those attending Tuesday's meeting.

South Loop resident Tina Easter, mother of three whose oldest child is just 6, said she wanted more details about security and a commitment to programming for kids between the ages of 5 and 10.

"I'm happy something is happening but I really wish there could be something more," she said.

In other Near South park news, Foster said in response to a question from the audience Tuesday that plans for a new field house in Chinatown's Ping Tom Park, are in the design phase.

The fields north of 18th just east of the Chicago River, site of the future field house, however, will be rehabbed for soccer and football this fall.

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