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Play ball: St. Mary's invests \$4 million in stadium plan

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Rev. Mitch Doyen said the school's \$1.1 million land acquisition will help revitalize the neighborhood.

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For the Rev. Mitch Doyen, the recent purchase of more than six acres next to St. Mary's High School in South St. Louis is a true "field of dreams" moment.

Doyen, president of the Catholic high school for boys, said the school plans to break ground in March 2009 on a new \$4 million baseball stadium and tennis courts on the site of the St. Michael's Apartments property at 4730 S. Spring Ave.

St. Mary's bought the property, located next to its campus at 4701 S. Grand Ave., in May for \$1.1 million. Tenants in the mixed-income, 164-unit apartment complex have already been relocated, and the vacant buildings will be razed this fall.

The school is bidding the demolition and construction of the St. Mary's High School Sports Park as a joint contract. Principal Kevin Hacker is spearheading the construction process for the school. Architectural firm Christner is drawing up plans for the project.

Doyen said the new athletic facilities also will be open to neighborhood youth groups. "We see an opportunity to expand and enhance the property, and help revitalize the neighborhood," he said.

The new ballfield will be paid for as part of a \$6 million capital fund-raising campaign under way at the school. To date, the school has raised more than \$2 million, including a \$500,000 gift from the Archdiocese of St. Louis. The school also is planning on making other improvements to school facilities, including adding air conditioning and replacing a grass football field with synthetic turf.

St. Mary's is privately financing the acquisition and build-out of the stadium and is pursuing sponsors to help in fund-raising. St. Mary's has 400 students and was founded in 1931. Tuition is \$7,160 for seniors and \$6,985 for underclassmen.

St. Mary's has more than doubled the size of its campus footprint in the past five years to 27 acres. In 2004, the school bought the former St. Joseph's Home for Boys at 4753 S. Grand Ave., which it uses as its Center for Applied Sciences. Doyen said the growth of the school's facilities could help accommodate a boost in the school's enrollment to 450 students.

Making the land deal happen took more than a year and the help of the city of St. Louis. The St. Michael's property was zoned for residential use, and paving the way for the baseball project took a land use change that was finalized in May.

The apartment property's previous owners, the St. Louis Equity Fund and the Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance, originally sought to sell the property in the spring of 2007. The 50-year-old apartment complex was 60 percent occupied and cash-flow negative, and did not attract a buyer. Steve Stogel and Doug Woodruff of St. Louis-based real estate development firm DFC Group were brought in last fall to help broker a deal.

"I am very pleased that St. Mary's was able to arrange to purchase these properties from the Equity Fund," said Mayor Francis Slay, who graduated from St. Mary's in 1973. "In an era when schools must offer a wide variety of sports facilities in order to be competitive, St. Mary's was at a disadvantage. Adding this property and the sports facilities is a big enhancement for the future of the school."

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