



November 11, 2009

Gonzales ball fields: Aiming to light up the night

Grass-roots group works to improve health, recreation

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GONZALES — Ball fields in Gonzales go dark when the sun goes down.

And in the fall, dark seems to come earlier every day, said father of five Fernando Meza.

"I like to get them out of the house," Meza said Tuesday. "But the parks close so early."

The family lives near Centennial Park. The Meza kids tackle every sport from football to volleyball. The park lets the children practice and the family spend time together.

"We come here with the kids to play," Meza said. "We'd love to stay later. But because there are no lights, the park closes at dark."

The grassy stretch of land may soon get a \$200,000 face-lift — including lights that would allow Little Leagues to host more than a single-evening baseball game before spring twilight settles into dusk.

The project is the work of Poder Popular para la Salud del Pueblo, which had a ceremonial groundbreaking at the ballfield on Tuesday. Poder Popular is a California Endowment-funded program that uses community input to improve the lives and neighborhoods of farmworkers.

"We are seeking to improve community infrastructure and increase recreation opportunities," said Nicolas Sandoval Jr., Poder Popular's Gonzales program coordinator. He works through the Community Foundation of Monterey County, which administers the funding grant. "This project meets both those goals."

Meza is a member of the group, which brings together community, business and faith leaders to hear residents' needs and help make them a reality.

In four years, the Gonzales-branch of the group worked to prevent school bus cuts and lobbied Monterey-Salinas Transit to add a bus route into town.

Gonzales City Manager Rene Méndez said the group is instrumental in spreading the word about government services and letting leaders know what the community needs.

"They are a great sounding board," he said.

Next the group plans to create a health council, increase the number of low-income homes in Gonzales and bring light to more streets, parks and ball fields.

Poder put together a \$30,000 grant toward lighting Centennial Park. It's secured some other funding for the project. Next week, representatives from Major League Baseball's grant-making Baseball

Tomorrow Fund plan to walk the park with community leaders — another sign the group's work is about to turn into results.

"I feel something inside that makes me happy because I am doing something good for the community," Meza said, "not just for my kids or my family, but for the whole community."

Additional Facts

Online

www.cfmco.org/poder/poder.html
