



Generations of families have called Conneaut home for decades, once a bustling Great Lakes port and blessed with seven miles of beautiful Lake Erie shoreline. Despite challenging economics, this picturesque city of over 12,000 residents is growing as a water recreation tourist destination and vacation home community. These trends, however, are not yet strong enough to make up for the widening gap between Conneaut's capacity to provide local public funding and what is needed for a strong school system and community. Two areas that have suffered are school athletics and community recreation.

Conneaut's very outdated and limited school athletic facilities are incongruous with its academically rated "excellent" schools. Currently, there are no public recreational facilities in Conneaut and with a median household income significantly below the state average, this negatively impacts the quality of life for many residents. ***Without good school athletic and community recreational facilities, Conneaut's ability to attract and retain new residents and businesses will diminish.***

In late 2008, a group of Conneaut business and community leaders came together in support of the greater Conneaut community and its schools. These visionary volunteers formed the CARE for Kids committee and over an 18-month period, developed an innovative plan for a facility appropriately named SPARC - A Social Place for Athletics, Recreation and Community. SPARC is a 20-acre school athletic, recreation and community event campus in central Conneaut adjacent to Conneaut High School.

SPARC will be built in six phases over a five-year period with completion anticipated in 2015. To build and help sustain SPARC, the CARE for Kids committee launched a capital/endowment campaign in 2010 seeking \$5.5 million in donations and gifts-in-kind from grants and private sources. The campaign has had a strong start, and Phase 1 (land acquisition, installation of football stadium bleachers and press box) was recently completed and is now in use. Subsequent phases will build a new 8-lane track and practice fields, soccer field, 9,000 square foot field house, outdoor tennis courts and a community building (offices, meeting room and lockers) all with public seating, restrooms and concessions.

Once complete, Conneaut's SPARC will have wide-ranging and long-term results. Stronger schools, increased community wellness, and economic growth are direct SPARC outcomes. With solid community support and the completion of Phase 1, the time is now to drive to the finish for SPARC. By doing so, Conneaut will attain its 21<sup>st</sup> century vision: ***to be an historic and vibrant lakefront community utilizing its great resources for life-long well-being and opportunity for all.***

*Conneaut SPARC - A Community Opportunity. A Community Investment.*

## CONNEAUT, OHIO – HISTORIC ROOTS WITH A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY VISION

Conneaut, Ohio is known for over seven miles of shoreline along Lake Erie with beautiful beaches, boating and great steelhead, perch and walleye fishing. Located along a Native American trail used by Ohio pioneers heading westward, Conneaut became a prosperous village on an extension of the Erie Canal. The word *conneaut* comes from the Seneca language with one meaning thought to be “a place of many fish.”



**Aerial view of Conneaut's seven-mile shoreline.**

Conneaut's natural lakefront harbor developed into a bustling Great Lakes port by the early 1900s. Tons of coal, iron ore and limestone came through its docks, which were connected by rail to regional steel mills and other manufacturing facilities. The population grew as well, and Conneaut became a city in 1902. The Port of Conneaut is still active as an international port although the market it serves has decreased significantly.

This picturesque Lake Erie coast city of over 12,000 people is growing as a water



**Downtown Conneaut - a friendly small town.**

recreation tourist destination. And starting to grow are the number of new vacation home residents, who are attracted by the amenities of Conneaut's lakefront and lake view living. Conneaut's city leaders are building on this trend and believe that once again, the lakefront locale is crucial to a better economic era.

A group of dedicated business and community leaders have stepped forward and formed the

CARE for Kids<sup>1</sup> committee. Their vision of Conneaut as a historic and vibrant lakefront community is the inspiration for SPARC, a Social Place for Athletics, Recreation and Community. SPARC has already taken hold and is revitalizing Conneaut to its 21<sup>st</sup> century potential.

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<sup>1</sup> CARE stands for Conneaut Area Recreational Endowment which is the name of the growing fund that has been established to support CARE projects, such as SPARC. CARE is an ad hoc committee of the Conneaut Area City Schools, which as an Ohio public school district can receive tax-deductible donations and gifts-in-kind.

## A COMMUNITY IN NEED

Like many smaller communities, Conneaut has struggled to stem the widening gap between its local public funding and what is needed for a strong school system and community. Two related areas that have suffered are school athletics and community recreation:

- Conneaut students in the track program can only compete “away” since there is no regulation track at “home.”
- There are no tennis courts for students or residents’ to use since the aged, patched courts are well beyond repairs and maintenance.
- The soccer field uses the football field so its practices and interscholastic play schedule has to be “fit in.”

***It is incongruous that the Conneaut Area City Schools system--consistently rated as “excellent” academically<sup>2</sup>--has such a limiting physical education program.***

School-sponsored athletic programs are not “frills” but a vital part of a solid academic program.<sup>3</sup> Important benefits of school athletic programs include:

1. Student athletes have higher grade-point averages, better attendance records, and lower drop-out rates.
2. School athletic programs promote teamwork, sportsmanship, rewards of hard work and self-discipline, and build self-confidence.
3. Participation in high school sports activities is often a predictor of later success in college – 95% of the surveyed CEOs of Fortune 500 companies reported that they were active in high school sports.

*“My participation in the Conneaut High School and City athletic programs fueled a spark that enabled me to receive a college degree and enter into the coaching profession. Relationships established with coaches, teammates and fans, along with skillful training and proper discipline remained with me during my 39 years of coaching (19 years at the NFL level).”*

*Tom Batta  
CHS, Class of 1960  
Retired, NFL coach  
CARE for Kids Committee*

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<sup>2</sup> Conneaut High School has been academically rated as “Excellent” by the State of Ohio continuously since 2005, the first Ashtabula County high school to receive this high mark. It has also earned a designation of “School of Promise” annually from the State Superintendent since 2005.

<sup>3</sup> National Federation of State High School Associations, “The Case for Activities,” 2008.

Conneaut's lack of school sports facilities has a wider impact. Many communities use such facilities for residents' recreation and community events when they are not in use by the school. Currently, there are no public recreational facilities in Conneaut. Residents' only options are to pay to join a local gym, buy their own equipment, and/or to go outside of Conneaut. This, coupled with the fact that the median household income in Conneaut (\$37,783) is significantly below the state average (\$47,988), negatively impacts the quality of life index for many residents.

There are major economic implications as well. Without strong school athletic and community recreational facilities, it will be harder to attract new residents, businesses and industries in an increasingly competitive market. And Conneaut's small but growing community of vacation home owners could stagnate. Conneaut is a community in need, and SPARC, a Social Place for Athletics, Recreation and Community, is the transformative solution.

## **SPARC: A Social Place for Athletics, Recreation and Community**

In late 2008, a group of Conneaut business and community leaders came together in support of the greater Conneaut community and specifically its schools, Conneaut Area City Schools ("CACs"). These visionary volunteers formed the CARE for Kids committee and assembled a preliminary plan for a much-needed school athletic and community recreational facility. Appropriately, the project was named SPARC (A Social Place for Athletics, Recreation and Community) with the following criteria:

- Support a full-range of school sports that is the physical education complement of Conneaut Area City Schools' excellent academic program.
- Support a new community recreation program serving pre-school to senior citizens that is available to the community.
- Host a variety of events: sports, performing arts, festivals, and community gatherings.
- Offer first-ever spectator amenities (good seating, restrooms and concessions) to attract audiences from within and outside Conneaut.
- Be accessible to the greater Conneaut community.

And there was one more very important stipulation: ***fund SPARC using grants and private donations since local public funding was fully committed to supporting Conneaut Schools' strong academic programs.***

It was a tall order. After 18 months of research and planning in partnership with the Conneaut Area City Schools, CARE released its plan. **SPARC will be a 20-acre school athletic, recreation and community event campus in central Conneaut adjacent to Conneaut High School. It will be constructed over the next five years, supported by a broad-based capital/endowment campaign seeking \$5.5 million in donations and gifts-in-kind from private sources.**

## SPARC TAKES SHAPE

The \$5.5 M SPARC capital/endowment campaign began in 2010 and will be ongoing throughout the anticipated completion date in 2015. The construction of new school sports and community recreational facilities will be phased as follows:

### PHASE 1: **Acquire Land, Football Stadium Bleachers with Press Box**

**COMPLETE**

Needed land (20 acres) acquired/secured

Football Home and Visitors Bleachers

Press Box Upgraded

*See Figure 2*



**Site Preparation for New Bleachers  
Summer 2010**



**New 1700-seat Home Bleacher Stand --**

### PHASE 2 **Outdoor Track, Soccer Field with Grandstand**

**IN PROGRESS**

Demolition of Eighthmy Building/Site Preparation

8-Lane, 400 M Outdoor Track with Lighting

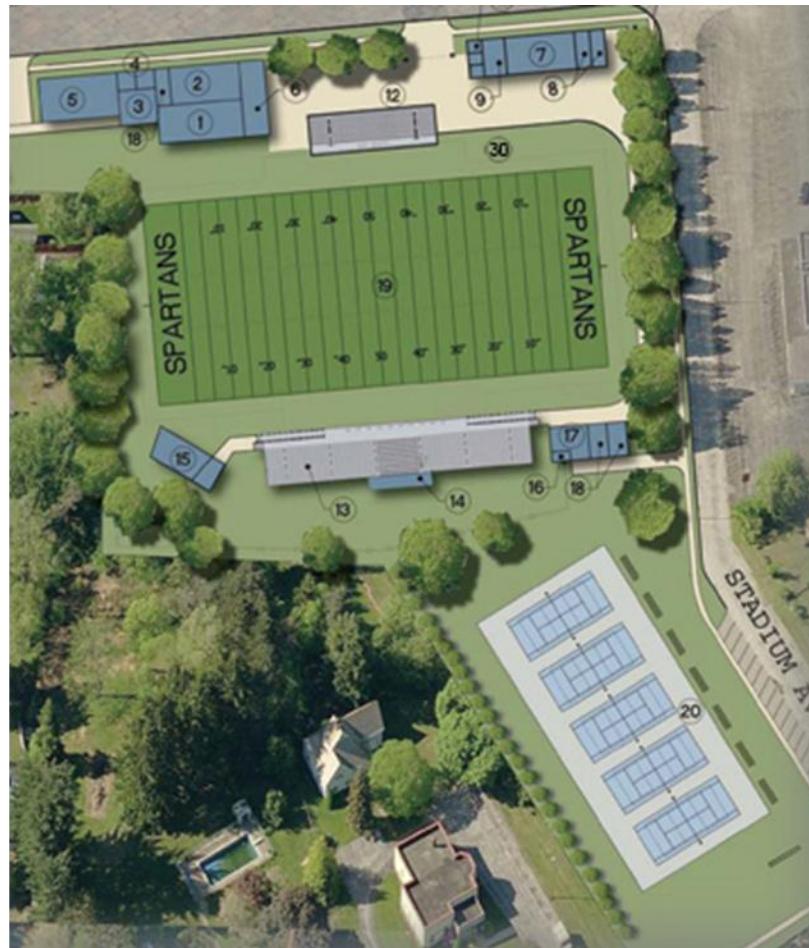
Soccer Field and Track/Soccer Grandstand with Seating, Restrooms  
and Concessions

*See Figure 2*



**Figure 1: Upper SPARC Campus with 8-Lane Track (25), Soccer Field (24) and Grandstand (21) to be constructed in Phase 2; Field House (29) and Track/Soccer Building (22, 23) in Phase 4; and Practice Fields (26, 27, 28) in Phase 6.**

- PHASE 3            Outdoor Tennis Courts with Parking**  
Five Outdoor Tennis Courts with Lighting and Parking Lot  
*See Figure 2*
- PHASE 4            Field House, Track/Soccer Building, Band Shell**  
9,000 square foot Field House  
Track/Soccer Lockers and Concessions  
Band Shell  
*See Figures 1, 2*
- PHASE 5            Football Grandstand with Tennis Building, Entrance Building, Community Building**  
Football Grandstand/Tennis Building with Seating, Restrooms, Concessions  
Entrance Building  
Community Building with Locker Rooms, Fitness/Weight Room and Meeting Spaces.  
*See Figure 2*
- PHASE 6            Practice Fields, Finishing**  
Construction of Practice Fields and General Site Work with Landscaping, Lighting



*Figure 2: Lower SPARC Campus with completed Football Home and Visitors' Stands and Press Box (12, 13, 14); outdoor Tennis Courts with parking (20) in Phase 3; Phase 4's Band Shell (15); and Football/Tennis Grandstand (17, 18) and Community Building (1-5) in Phase 5.*

## SPARC IMPACT

Even before Phase 1 construction, SPARC had a galvanizing effect on greater Conneaut. The “buzz” from the community meetings and survey generated excitement and several early donations. The energy around SPARC intensified in 2010 when the Phase 1 bleacher stands were installed and a dedicated web site ([www.conneautsparc.com](http://www.conneautsparc.com)) launched. For many residents in this economically hard-hit town, these were not just amenities, they were validations of SPARC's promise and Conneaut's brighter future.

The Phase 1 bleachers had another desired outcome – more spectators for both intermural and interscholastic competitions. Grassroots volunteer fundraising efforts (concessions, raffle tickets, preferred seating) went into full swing, with “word of mouth” communications fanning SPARC’s flames. Another group of volunteers, the Care for Kids Committee, attracted new members and has become the fundraising arm to secure major gifts and grants.

The above are just early indicators of the profound effect a fully-built SPARC will have on greater Conneaut, namely:

- **An expanded and balanced school athletic program through Grade 12 with vigorous intermural and interscholastic competitions**, upgraded from an uneven program that did not include all major sports.
  - *SPARC will increase the number of school annual sports users six times (634 students) through expanded programs of current and new sports programs.*
- **An established, year round recreational program serving greater Conneaut residents from pre-school to senior citizens**, upgraded from two seasonal youth only programs.

## **SPARC**

### **Conneaut’s Brighter Future**

More than half of the Conneaut respondents<sup>1</sup> “Agreed Strongly” or “Agreed” that the new school/community athletic and recreation complex [SPARC] would:

- Help Conneaut attract and retain residents
- Encourage more students to get involved with extra-curricular activities, and
- Provide a much needed “spark” for the revitalization of the greater Conneaut community.

In addition, residents were most excited about the ability to host events ranging from sports and festivals through community gatherings.

<sup>1</sup>From a 2010 statistically representative telephone survey of Conneaut residents commissioned by the Care for Kids Committee.



- SPARC will offer new programming that will grow from two summer youth programs (~100 participants) to dozens of year-round offerings serving several hundred residents multiple times throughout the year.
  - A conservative number of usages for a community this size would be 14,000 annual usages (10% of the 12,000 residents visiting 12 times/year), which is more than a 15-fold increase.
- **An attractive 20-acre, centrally located campus hosting school and interscholastic sports competitions and for the first time, concerts, festivals and community gatherings.**
- Spectator attendance for interscholastic sports competitions is expected to more than triple to over 8,000 annually.
  - New expanded concessions will result in increased sales and net proceeds, which will be used to support SPARC programs and facilities.
  - Non-sports events are expected to grow from none currently to an initial few to larger scale concerts, craft/antique shows and festivals when SPARC is complete. Even a modest draw (10,000 attendees/year) would result in an increase of several hundred thousands of dollars being spent at SPARC and outlying Conneaut businesses annually.

By its very existence, SPARC demonstrates Conneaut's forward-looking and positive community spirit, undaunted by trying economic conditions. The strength of the emotional bond between residents and their hometown can have real economic benefits. A 2010 study by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation found that cities with high levels of resident attachment also had strong economic growth (GDP) over time despite downward economic trends. For Conneaut, this would translate into retaining current and attracting new businesses and residents.

Conneaut's SPARC will have wide-ranging and long-term results. Stronger schools, increased community wellness, and economic growth are direct SPARC outcomes. With solid community support and the recent completion of Phase 1, the time is now to drive to the finish for SPARC. By doing so, Conneaut will attain its 21<sup>st</sup> century vision **to be an historic and vibrant lakefront community utilizing its great resources for life-long well-being and opportunity for all.**

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"Conneaut's SPARC ... [will be] so beneficial to our community in promoting health and wellness programs not just for our school age children but the entire community. In a small community like ours it makes me PROUD to be a citizen of Conneaut and experience the community coming together to make this facility possible. It's not just about "sports," it's about a healthy environment for children and adults of all ages. It will live on through our children and grandchildren and leave a legacy for years to come."

*Deborah Newcomb  
Former State Representative  
CARE for Kids Committee*

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