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Vikings stadium getting re-mastered

By Ryan Nagelhout Niagara Gazette

Grand Island's Masters Field will say farewell to grass and hello to night games after the 2012 football season as part of a multi-million dollar capitol improvements project approved by Island residents in late December.

The school's athletic facilities were front and center in the two-part capital project that also renovates the auditorium, pool and gym while providing other infrastructure improvements in all five area schools.

Among those improvements is a renovated Masters Field including an artificial turf field, bleachers, scoreboard and an eight-lane track with steeplechase.

"Obviously we're excited for our football program," Grand Island football coach Dean Santorio said. "But it's nice for our soccer programs and lacrosse and track to get a facility that you can feel really good about and be proud of."

Proposition One includes \$23.4 million in funding for the high school, which will replace lighting systems, sound systems, padding and bleachers in the school's gym. The pool's acoustics, sound system and floors will also be upgraded along with the resurfacing of the school's tennis courts.

Proposition Two will renovate Masters Field, which is used for football, lacrosse, soccer and track and field events.

Proposition One passed by a 1,610 to 200 margin, while Proposition Two was approved with a 1,361 to 516 vote.

"I just thought it was a resounding demonstration of support for the two propositions from the board of education," Grand Island athletic director Jon Roth said. "It was a total effort by everybody."

While the \$46.8 million Proposition One required no tax increase, Proposition Two required a \$2.13 per year increase in taxes per \$50,000 of a resident's assessed home value.

"You have to put money into your community and the school system's the best way to put money into your community and see benefits in the long run," Santorio said. "Our athletic program deserves something like this."

In 2011, Grand Island was ranked No. 7 by Business First in its list of top high school sports programs in Western New York. Roth cited the overall success of the school's athletic programs and hard work from his coaches and athletic boosters to spread the word about the project.

Two years ago a similar capital improvements project was brought to the public but fell short. Santorio said a group of parents also tried to privately finance a stadium fundraiser but decided it would be too difficult.

Roth said the district learned from its past mistakes.

"It was a blessing in disguise," Roth said. "We went to school on what went wrong and worked very hard with the facility committee to look at the first one and say 'Where did we make our mistakes?'"

Work is expected to begin on Masters Field next spring and be completed in time for the 2013 school year. That could mean some schedule shuffling come next spring.

"I'm sure we'll have to move lacrosse games around and things like that. There's always the possibility of putting our teams on the road because it's not just the football field getting worked on," Roth said. "I don't know how much that'll interfere with all that, but I'm sure at least in the spring the varsity lacrosse team may have to go on the road for a season."

Once a new turf and lights are installed, Roth said the school could host night games and Section VI postseason events year-round. It will also cut down on the games canceled in the spring due to poor weather.

"In the fall and spring seasons it could be used every day of the week," Roth said. "It's going to really relieve things, especially in the spring. You'll get all your teams outside a little quicker."