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FEATURED

# Cam-plex plans rest of amphitheater site; projects under budget so far

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Despite recent snow, groundwork for the future amphitheater at Cam-plex park is well under way.

Ed Glazar

The ground work to clear the amphitheater site at Cam-plex Park in time for the International Pathfinders Camporee is mostly complete, as the next phases of the process remain in the works, including equipping the area with utilities and just as importantly, waiting on grass to grow.

Although the additional costs to host the 50,000-plus person event were estimated at almost \$3 million this summer, the final bills may come in at less than \$1 million once completed.

Last week, the Campbell County Public Land Board approved putting out a request for qualifications to get a better idea of what irrigation system and grass types it will take to properly grow grass in the year between when the amphitheater site is cleared this spring and when the Camporee comes to Gillette in August 2024.

“The irrigation piece is the big unknown,” said Aaron Lyles, Cam-plex executive director. “It could be very expensive based on construction activities, cost of construction right now, we don’t really have a great idea what those costs might look like.”

The request will screen which firms are interested in taking on the project to irrigate the field.

While potentially expensive, the goal is to save money in the long run by getting the right guidance on the front end, Lyles said.

“It could cause us a lot more headaches if we did it wrong,” said land board member Charlene Camblin.

Once the amphitheater site is graded and cleared this spring, the city of Gillette can move forward with equipping the site with electricity and utilities.

Given the tight window, there’s little room for error.

“We have one growing season, 128 days, to grow this grass right one time,” Lyles said.

Land board member and former Campbell County Commissioner Bob Maul said that the expenses have continued to add up since the original Camporee talks first began.

“Everything that we seem to do has turned into many times what initially it was set up to be and it’s kind of like having someone blow smoke up your skirt” and telling you it’s going to be something better than it is, Maul said.

The estimated cost to meet the Camporee contract requirements has fluctuated from the time Cam-plex was chosen to host the event in early 2021.

As the contract talks finalized this summer, the cost of meeting a series of additional expenses and the amphitheater site construction was estimated to reach as high as \$2.9 million.

Since then, the costs associated with preparing the amphitheater site and Cam-plex to host more than 50,000 people have come in well below budget.

Depending on how much the irrigation system and city work winds up costing, the items that neared a \$3 million estimate may end up costing under \$1 million, said Darin Edmonds, land board chairman.

“It just keeps getting more ridiculous and that’s what’s giving a lot of the locals heartburn,” Maul said.

Lyles said that since picking up the project when he joined Cam-plex in November, it was clear there was a communication void while without an executive director.

Former Cam-plex general manager Jeff Esposito resigned unexpectedly in May for an out-of-state job, leaving the facility shorthanded ahead of the National High School Finals Rodeo and amid the Camporee contract negotiations.

“Some of these conversations waned for a while,” Lyles said.

From recent talks with the agencies involved, he said some have been cautious to be proactive out of fear that another agency might change the plan unexpectedly.

“In my experience with construction, things start to get very expensive when we think we have a plan and it wasn’t informed, or we have to start touching things more than once, or it takes a lot longer than anticipated,” Lyles said.

The roadway design that runs through the back of the Cam-plex campus from Boxelder Road to North Garner Lake Road near the Energy Exhibit, which the land board also approved last week, is a step toward giving the city and county confidence in the overall plan, he said.

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Jake Goodrick