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Building community around a ball park

BY THERESA KEEGAN
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The latest endeavor in Ramapo is proving to be a grand slam not just for the town's economy, but also for the community as the Rockland Boulders prepare for the upcoming season.

"There's nothing like it around," Josh Meyer said of the minor league baseball effort that will launch a new season Tuesday. "We're definitely pulling from all the areas, Northern New Jersey, Westchester, Orange, Putnum and, of course, Rockland."



As a key player in coordinating the innovative public/private partnership that began in 2007, he's thrilled to see the stadium in action.

"As with any big project like this, there was some controversy," said Meyer, a partner in the law firm of Pannone, Lopes, Devereaux & West LLC, "but at the end

of the day, the town and the town board were able to develop it as a public-private partnership and develop it in a cost-effective and efficient manner.”

The stadium has even expanded its offerings beyond the Boulder Minor League franchise and will be hosting concerts this year, along with college baseball games, flea markets, carnivals and other community gatherings. Everyone involved in the project credits the town supervisor with having the vision, and the tenacity to see it through to completion.

“It just really brings people together from throughout the county, from all different walks of life, for a common event,” said Teno West, partner in the firm. “It’s wonderful.”

When the idea of a minor league stadium was first considered, there were challenges, admits West. But as specialists in government infrastructure projects, the firm was up to the challenge.

As specialists in multi-faceted projects, Pannone, Lopes, Devereaux & West LLC has been able to cross traditional hurdles in the legal field and streamline services for clients. It has two offices, one in Providence, Rhode Island, and the other in Westchester, which specializes in government infrastructure issues and headed up the ballpark proposal.

“This has been a wonderful project for our (legal) team,” says West. “It was great to have a project that allowed all of our practice areas come together in an efficient, effective way. We worked with the baseball team and also on construction agreements, financing, and even defending the project in litigation.” And when the first ball is thrown out tomorrow, all those hassles will be a thing of the past as approximately 5,000 people gather to enjoy the great American pastime. And, based on early feasibility studies, unlike the \$400 per family price tag that a trip to the Yankees or Mets would require of a family of four in Rockland County, this night will cost about \$75.

“There are tremendous savings to be able to go to something like this,” says Meyer. The \$30 million price tag for the stadium was funded through the creation of the Ramapo Local Development Corp., a quasi public non-profit entity that issued bonds for the construction costs.

“They were willing to go out and obtain the financing and pay back the debt service through proceeds generated from the ballpark throughout the year,” explains Meyer.

“The team collaborated with the design to make it cost effective and also contributed \$1 million toward development of the stadium and the town developed part of the project and the local development corporation. They all collaborated.” And as an additional boon, local restaurants and hotels have also seen an uptick in business when there’s an event at the stadium, generating additional tax revenue, a situation that expected to expand with the addition of this year’s concert roster.

The end product is a state-of-the-art facility that includes a 360-degree walk around concourse, so the game can be viewed even from the outfield, explained Meyer. Last year about 123,000 people attended games, and it’s expected early enthusiasm may send those numbers even higher this season. The 16 luxury suites have been a highlight for companies that want to entertain clients or even host an affordable company outing. In addition, there is a short porch in right field that allows people to be directly on field level and a bridge bar and picnic areas as well as a kids’ area with playful park equipment.

“I believe it’s really about quality of life,” says Meyer. “The minor league baseball games get the families out, in an inexpensive way, and it’s just a great addition to the entire community.”