

BLUE RIBBONS Community collaboration · Trails and connections · Sports tourism

RED FLAGS Parks, trails and sports infrastructure funding · Green space preservation · Obesity

New normal: Higher activity drives investment

Parks, trails and outdoor recreation facilities bustled with activity during the pandemic, and the area's **trail system** and **sports tourism industry** strengthened as Blue Ribbons as area residents' lives resumed a sense of normalcy.

The pandemic yielded another unexpected gift to help with a Red Flag: **infrastructure funding**. Since the 2021 Community Focus Report, grants from the federal American Rescue Plan Act and community investment are transforming several aspects of our recreation community, including the Springfield-Greene County Park Board's Lake Country Soccer and Killian Sports Complex, both part of the greater Cooper Park Sports Complex.

A \$25 million reinvestment plan announced in 2022 calls for artificial turf on 19 sports fields at Cooper Park — baseball, softball and soccer — as well as facility and parking upgrades. The City of Springfield, the State of Missouri and the Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau designated a combined \$20.8 million in ARPA funding for this project, expected to be complete in 2025.

The Ozark Empire Fairgrounds is also investing in infrastructure. As part of a \$25 million capital campaign for fairgrounds improvements, the Ozark Empire Fair board is constructing a 100,000-square-foot, 6,300-seat indoor multipurpose arena scheduled to open this year. The Wilson Logistics Arena is designed to accommodate trade shows, concerts, livestock shows, motor sports and a variety of sporting competitions — including arena football. The Arena League announced in June that the new Ozarks Lunkers arena football team will call the arena home, with play expected to begin in Summer 2024. The new arena also houses an Ag Learning Center. ARPA funding for the project includes \$5 million from Greene County and \$10 million from the state.

After years of negotiations, the City of Springfield purchased Hammons Field from the John Q Hammons Charitable Trust in March 2023, following approval from a U.S. Bankruptcy Court. The \$12 million purchase agreement included the stadium and two adjacent parking lots, funded through the city's



RECENT SUCCESS STORY

Golf was an unexpected winner from the pandemic.

Played outside in wide open spaces with easy social distancing, golf was a natural attraction for people who sought safe exercise and companionship. Both locally and nationally, golf saw a resurgence of activity during the pandemic, and interest has remained strong since then.

In the years before pandemic, golf had experienced a decline nationally, as golfers aged out the game and courses closed, particularly lower-priced municipal courses. In 2020, COVID restrictions hit golf courses, although demand increased during national shutdowns. By 2021, when most golf courses were able to operate at full capacity, total golf rounds measured 17% above the pre-pandemic five-year average. Golf rounds were not as high in 2022, but were still up 13% over pre-pandemic averages (see chart on page 2).

For Park Board golf courses, total rounds of golf and golf revenue had been fairly steady in the five years leading up to the pandemic, save for a dip in 2017, when Rivercut Golf Course was closed for several weeks due to flood damage.

Local interest in golf rose dramatically in 2020, despite COVID restrictions. By 2021, rounds of golf had increased by 23% over the pre-pandemic five-year average.

Despite the national dip, local golf numbers are holding strong, buoyed by a generation of new golfers and unseasonably warm winters in Springfield. The Park Board set a record in June 2022, with the largest single-month revenue collection ever in the golf division, and this year is poised to be another banner year for golf.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRINGFIELD-GREENE COUNTY PARK BOARD

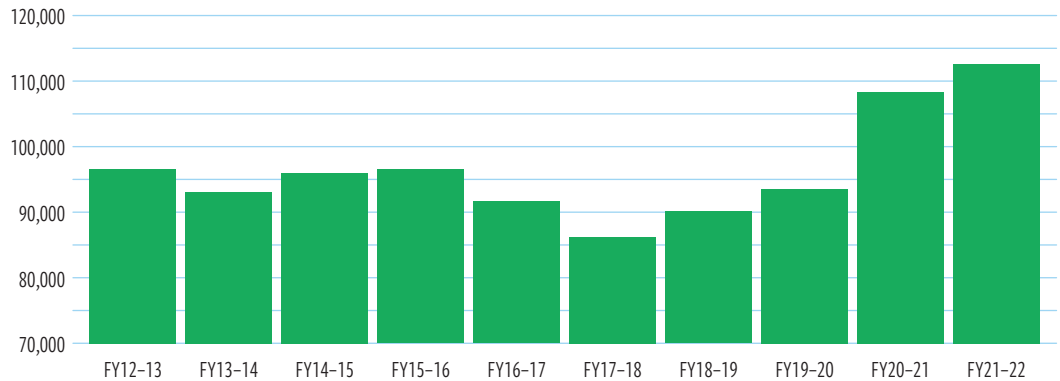
general fund savings and monies earmarked for the “economic vitality” category from the level property tax. The city also announced a \$4 million capital improvement fund for immediate facility improvements required by Major League Baseball, addressing player health and safety and spectator experience. The deal ensured the Springfield Cardinals would continue to call Hammons Field home through 2038 — an uncertainty under previous ownership — and extended the lease agreement with Missouri State University’s Baseball Bears.

Since the 2021 Community Focus Report, the Betty & Bobby Allison Sports Town has opened, bringing new opportunities for youth and adult soccer, court sports, football and more. A combination of private investment and funds from the City of Springfield built this facility, with four indoor basketball courts, two indoor turf soccer fields and 12 outdoor soccer fields — including four with artificial turf.

In 2021, Springfield partnered with the Park Board to purchase the Fieldhouse SportsCenter, an indoor facility with four courts for basketball and eight for volleyball that had been privately owned and operated. Since the sale, sports programming has been strong, with uninterrupted recreational and competitive leagues for

KEY METRICS

Rounds of Golf at Springfield-Greene County Public Courses, 2012-2022



SOURCE: SPRINGFIELD-GREENE COUNTY PARK BOARD

youth, and new pickleball courts and other opportunities.

Springfield voters also renewed tourism funding in the hotel-motel tax renewal on the April 2023 ballot, with more than 66% approval.

The Recreation, Sports & Leisure 2023 Update was produced by Jenny Fillmer Edwards of Springfield-Greene County Park Board with input from Bob Belote, Chris Coulter, Jim Fisher, Lance Kettering, John Mackey, Anne-Mary McGrath, Kristen Milam, Karen Mellinger, Jerry Mitchell, Nick Nelson, Kim Reser and Cora Scott.

ABOUT THE 2023 UPDATE

This interim update reviews current data for the Blue Ribbons and Red Flags from the 2021 report. The 20th anniversary report, to be released in 2024, will develop an updated list of Blue Ribbons and Red Flags.