

Memphis Business Journal

Friday, May 18, 2001

Fisher & Arnold transforms old air force base into sports park

Memphis Business Journal - by [Michael Paulk](#)

Instead of jet fighters and military aircraft, golf balls and baseballs will soon be flying around part of the former Eaker Air Force Base in Blytheville, Ark.

When the city of Blytheville decided to build a new city park on 50 acres of the former Eaker base that would include a baseball complex and golf course, it turned to Memphis-based **Fisher & Arnold**, Inc., to design the sportsplex.

Elected in 1998, Barrett Harrison, mayor of Blytheville, says one of his first priorities was to find a way to enhance recreational opportunities available to the residents of Blytheville. Working in conjunction with Fisher & Arnold principal and landscape architect Russell Adsit, the city came up with the idea of using land from the former military base that had been deeded to the city.

Harrison says city officials checked out several similar park projects that mirrored Blytheville's vision, and that led them to Fisher & Arnold.

"I just looked at several other parks that turned out all to have been designed by Fisher & Arnold, and it looked like they did a good job," Harrison says.

City officials told Adsit their vision was to create an area that could provide as much recreational space as could possibly fit on the parcel that was available.

What Adsit came up with was a complex that included eight ball fields for use by every level of youth baseball or softball, four soccer fields and, by design and necessity, a seven-acre lake surrounded by a walking trail.

"We suggested the trail around the lake, and the lake itself for that matter, because we needed the dirt from that area to level the ball fields," Adsit says.

With a construction cost of more than \$3.8 million, the park, tabbed Thunderland Bayou Recreation Complex, will sit adjacent to the new \$3.5-million, 18-hole Thunder Bayou Golf Links that is being designed and built by architecture firm Ault, Clark and Associates.

That golf course, currently under construction, is being built to coexist with a 9-hole city-owned course that was part of the base and will give the city 27 holes of golf to offer visitors, Harrison says.

Although the new 18-hole course is not under his firm's umbrella, Adsit was able to participate in every other facet of the design of the sports complex.

"We design everything from the sign on the outfield fence that says 325 feet to the water fountains and the trash cans," he says.

In particular, adding underground irrigation and drainage systems for the fields was a big design challenge, he says, because the city wants to use Thunderland as a tool to attract large baseball and softball tournaments to the area.

"You can't just slick it up and build," Adsit says. "If you want to use the field for tournaments, then you have to worry about drainage. If you don't have it, then most of these leagues are going to shy away from your fields."

Harrison says that the city aspires to the same level of success that Southaven, Miss., has had with Snowden Grove Park -- a park and baseball complex which now hosts the Dizzy Dean World Classics and National Amateur Baseball Federation World Classic.

Already, Blytheville has signed a contract to host the regional tournament of a baseball league for 14-year-old players that is expected to draw teams and fans from an eight-state radius.

The Thunderland Bayou Recreation Complex project is being funded by a bond issue that will be retired by a half-cent sales taxes hike recently approved by area voters.

"It passed by a wide margin because people here are just excited about improving the quality of life," Harrison says.

Adsit has completed the rough grading plans, sports lighting plans and is currently finishing planning for the concession stand/restroom building and the backstops and field improvements.

The entire complex is scheduled to open in 2002.

CONTACT staff writer Michael Paulk at 259-1726 or by e-mail at mpaulk@bizjournals.com

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.