

SOCA selects site for larger facility

By Jeremy Borden

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The Soccer Organization of Charlottesville-Albemarle has a new home in Albemarle County, officials plan to announce today.

It's been years since the largest organized sports organization in Central Virginia started planning for a new headquarters, and it plans to build an approximately \$5 million facility in the yet-to-be-constructed Belvedere development off East Rio Road.

Bill Mueller, SOCA's executive director, isn't popping champagne yet. He said the project still has to gain approvals from Albemarle County.

"We would love to get the approvals," Mueller said. "We'll be happy when that takes place."

Plans call for three to five adjacent grass soccer fields with a view of the Rivanna River, an all-weather, fully lighted soccer field to accommodate training and competition and an indoor field house with one junior-size soccer field for training and competition opportunities in any weather. That building will also include administrative offices.

Chris Schooley, a Stonehaus developer working on Belvedere, said he was in the room last April when the Board of Supervisors rebuffed SOCA's original expansion plans. SOCA officials were certain they would receive approval for their plans for their facility off Polo Grounds Road, where they had proposed the same facilities that will exist in Belvedere.

However, the supervisors, with the exception of Lindsay G. Dorrier Jr., voted to deny the request, citing concerns about area traffic and about setting a precedent allowing large structures in the rural areas.

"We were so impressed with the passion and with the community," Schooley said. "We were convinced pretty quickly that this was something everyone would benefit from."

Stonehaus donated the land to SOCA for its project because "we appreciated this European model where soccer would be ... the center of a community. We're really trying to create that kind of community."

Belvedere will have around 700 energy-efficient homes, along with shops and offices. Construction is slated to start in December or January, Schooley said.

Supervisors David L. Slutzky and Kenneth C. Boyd have been working to find SOCA a home after voting "no" on SOCA's original plan.

"At the original meeting where we disappointed all those children, I said we really have to fix this problem," Slutzky said.

He said things would likely be different the next time around and expects supervisors to approve the new plan. County staff has already signed off on most of the plan, with the exception of the all-purpose field.

"There's the political reality that our board wanted to accommodate SOCA the last time," Slutzky said. "What we are going to be asked to support, we would normally be comfortable supporting anyway."

SOCA continues to expand every year, and public field space is at a premium for soccer and other sports as the area grows and leagues compete for field space. The new facility would put a small dent into that problem,

Mueller said.

"The field situation is bad," Mueller said. "We are playing catch-up. Any fields that we can build will help address the issue of the quantity of fields and the quality of fields in the community."