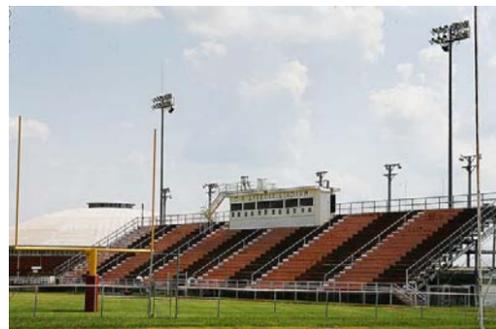


OKC
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BACK IN THE GAME



A ground-breaking ceremony is planned early this month at C.B. Speegle Stadium, shown at left in 2009.



The Oklahoma City School District has embarked on a \$19 million project to renovate Taft and Speegle Stadiums. Above, a groundbreaking ceremony was held Wednesday at Taft for the work being done to rebuilding the stadium. PHOTO BY JIM BECKEL, THE OKLAHOMAN

When he looks at C.B. Speegle Stadium, Keith Sinor doesn't just see a football field that he — as the athletic director of the Oklahoma City Public Schools — is responsible for keeping in adequate condition.

He sees his old home. The field he once played on. The locker room that he walked into every day after practice.

Sinor grew up as a student-athlete at Capitol Hill High School. He knows the history of Speegle Stadium on Oklahoma City's south side and Taft Stadium to the north.

Over the last three decades, the history of the stadiums has stood strong, but the structures themselves have not.

Sinor, entering his third school year as the athletic director at the school district, has headed a \$19 million project to renovate Taft and Speegle, stadiums that once served as cathedrals of high school football in Oklahoma City but have long since reached a state of disrepair.

Wednesday morning, district officials held a groundbreaking ceremony at Taft, which has been almost entirely flattened over the last few weeks, as work begins to rebuild the historic stadium. A similar ceremony is planned for Speegle in early September as the 10-month project moves past the demolition phase and into rebuilding mode.

Working with a local firm, MA+ Architecture, Sinor and the district's leadership put together a plan that would give the district's students athletic facilities comparable with

those in the suburban areas, while maintaining the historical elements that are woven into the city's past.

"The first question I got every time we appeared at a public meeting was, 'What are you doing with the Taft Wall?'" said Gary Armbruster, the Principal Architect for MA+.

The Taft Wall is the stadium's eastern facade, facing toward May Avenue. It's a large rock and brick wall with "Taft" written in a unique circular pattern above the ticket windows.

"To put everyone's mind at ease, we are repairing it, and making it look new, but it will remain," Armbruster said. "Our firm also specializes in historic preservation projects, so from that aspect, this has been a lot of fun to research and see all of the events that have been held in these stadiums in the past."

Both stadiums saw their share of legendary football games over the years, but Taft houses even more history. For years, it was Oklahoma City's stadium.

Pro football and soccer teams have played there. In the 1990s, legendary Gambling coach Eddie Robinson brought his team to Taft for a game against Langston.

Bob Fennimore led Oklahoma State to a 28-6 win over OU in the 1944 Bedlam game at Taft. That same year, Classen and Central played to a 6-6 tie in front of more than 18,000 fans in one of greatest games in state all game for many years.

Taft also hosted auto racing, with a dirt track

circling the football field. For decades after racing left the stadium, the bleachers beyond the south end zone still were guarded by the tall, wire fencing originally installed for the racetrack.

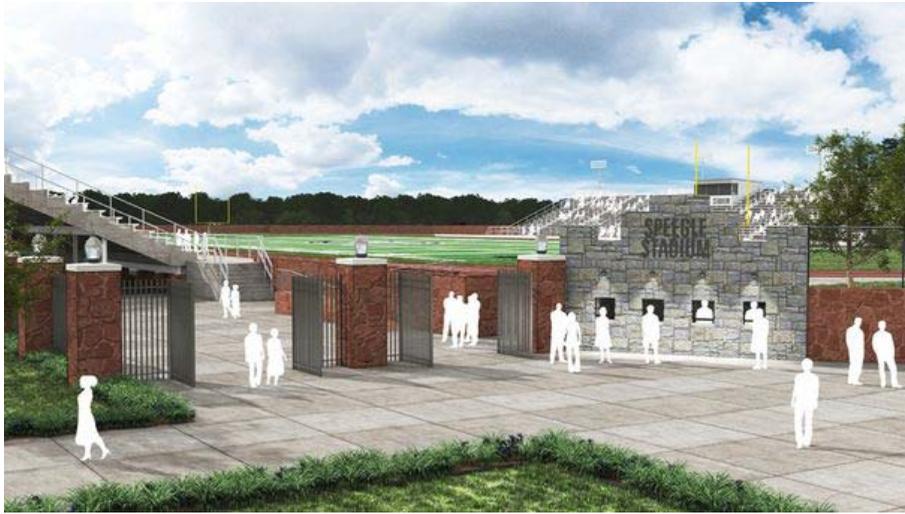
"One of the first things we did in the design phase of this project was to identify the historical aspects of the stadiums that we wanted to maintain the integrity of," Sinor said. "We did a lot of research with alumni and different stakeholders to make sure that the excitement about what was new would not be lost because we were destroying something that was sentimental to people on a historic level.

"We wanted to maintain the integrity and the historic value of the stadium, all the while knowing that to get the stadiums to where they needed to be, it had to virtually be a total teardown and rebuild."

The upcoming football season won't be easy for the district's five teams left without home stadiums for the year. But the long-term benefit seems to outweigh the short-term challenges.

"We've got people trying to create a positive environment," Northwest Classen coach Lloyd Smith said. "The tough thing this year is that the kids realize they're not going to be playing there. When you've got to go on the road for 10 weeks, it's a grind.

"But I'm hopeful that a facility like that, with a new stadium and new locker rooms, will inspire more kids in our school to come out and play football."



The planned entrance for Speegle Stadium.



The planned field at Speegle Stadium.



The planned entrance at Taft Stadium.



The planned field at Taft Stadium.

Renderings by MA+ Architecture.

THE PROJECT: PLANNED IMPROVEMENTS

In a combined project that will cost roughly \$19 million — coming from a past bond issue and other funds from Oklahoma City Public Schools — Taft and Speegle stadiums will undergo major renovations over the next 10 months.

The stadiums will be almost completely rebuilt, with only a few exceptions. The improvements are scheduled to be completed in time for the start of the 2014 football season.

Speegle Stadium, at Grand Boulevard and S Shartel Avenue on the Capitol Hill High School campus in southwest Oklahoma City, will have its home bleachers and press box demolished and rebuilt. The bleachers on the visitors' side will remain, as will the rock wall that encircles virtually all of the stadium.

Both sides of bleachers at Taft Stadium, NW 27 and May Avenue, have been demolished and will be rebuilt, though the outer wall of the east bleachers will be repaired and remain in its original form. Like Speegle, Taft has a rock wall circling part of the field. Both walls were built as part of Works Progress Administration projects in the late 1930s and will be retained in their current form.

Among the other improvements to both stadiums are:

- New playing surfaces for football and soccer.
- New track and field surfaces.
- New locker rooms and scoreboards.
- New concession stands, restrooms and seating areas for fans.

THE FUTURE: BIGGER EVENTS?

In June, before a single bulldozer had touched the ground at Taft Stadium, one of the most valuable benefits of the multimillion-dollar renovation started to come to focus.

The stadium is set to host professional soccer after a North American Soccer League team was awarded a two-year lease with renewal option to play at Taft.

The soccer club is bringing in an additional \$1 million to fund extra upgrades to the press box, as well as a video scoreboard and other improvements.

It is expected that the team could play as many as 30 home games paying \$4,500 per event at the stadium. Oklahoma City Public Schools also would receive a cut of profit from concession and ticket sales.

Regardless of any additional funds or improvements a soccer team could contribute, the new Taft and Speegle Stadiums will finally give the Oklahoma City School District two facilities capable of hosting bigger high school events once again, from track meets to soccer games, or even postseason football.

“Our goal is to have a venue that can be utilized for many different reasons,” district athletic director Keith Sinor said. “Concerts, OSSAA playoff events, any other type of uses we can come up with that could create revenue for athletics and stadium upkeep.”

THE IMPACT: SCHEDULING CONUNDRUM

With the renovations to Taft and Speegle Stadiums, five high school football teams — Northwest Classen, U.S. Grant, Capitol Hill, Southeast and John Marshall — are without home fields this fall.

And rather than having four stadiums to use for nine high school football teams, Oklahoma City Public Schools athletic director Keith Sinor has two.

That means Moses F. Miller Stadium at Douglass and Carl Twidwell Stadium at Star Spencer will see an increased load of football action.

But Sinor and the teams were able to solve the scheduling issue without too much trouble.

“When you’re down to two stadiums and trying to schedule nine football teams, it’s obviously problematic,” Sinor said. “It was just a matter of trying to find alternate locations to play some games. All-in-all, it wasn’t too terribly difficult, but it was a time consuming process.”

Oklahoma City Public Schools worked with nearby Crooked Oak Public Schools, an independent school District in south Oklahoma City, to use its football field for seven games. In other instances, Oklahoma City teams offered some opponents a buyout option for what would have been an Oklahoma City home game to instead be played at the opponent’s stadium.

The buyout option provided a win-win scenario. The cost for opponents was in the range of what the Oklahoma City schools stood to make at their home games, so they wouldn’t lose money by giving up a game. And the opponents add another home game with the likelihood they will profit well beyond what they paid for the buyout.

SCOTT WRIGHT, STAFF WRITER