

JAXUSL eyes burgeoning St. Johns County locale for training site

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Florida Times-Union | USA TODAY NETWORK

Northeast Florida's new professional soccer franchise advanced toward a \$30 million development of a training site in northwestern St. Johns County for its planned teams in both men's and women's leagues, clearing an initial hurdle Tuesday night with the St. Johns County board of commissioners.

The board voted 5-0 to "pursue a possible public partnership" with the JAXUSL ownership group, the next step toward the launch of soccer teams that could take the field by 2025.

The site, upon development, would become the new training home for Northeast Florida's fourth professional franchise in men's soccer and its first ever in women's soccer.

The proposal, termed Project Sham-

rock in the board's published agenda for Tuesday's meeting, is still in the preliminary stages, but would include facilities for professional training as well as more than a dozen fields for community use.

"We felt it was a good opportunity to work with the county to help address the field shortage," JAXUSL president Steve Livingstone said Wednesday in a remote interview with the Times-Union. "We need training facilities, and we felt it was

good to combine those two efforts."

JAXUSL, an ownership group including Livingstone, Ricky Caplin, Tony Allegretti and former Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Tim Tebow, last year received a franchise in the USL Championship, the second tier of competition for men's professional soccer in the United States.

See JAXUSL, Page 6C

JAXUSL

Continued from Page 1C

Jacksonville also received a selection in May's initial list of cities for the USL Super League, the planned women's professional soccer league that intends to launch next year, although the city's team plans a kickoff in 2025 or 2026.

However, Livingstone emphasized that while the training site project would become a valuable step in the club's launch, the search for a permanent stadium site remains active. He said the group continues to explore prospective stadium locations in Duval, Clay and St. Johns counties.

FIELDS PLANNED FOR BOOMING ST. JOHNS

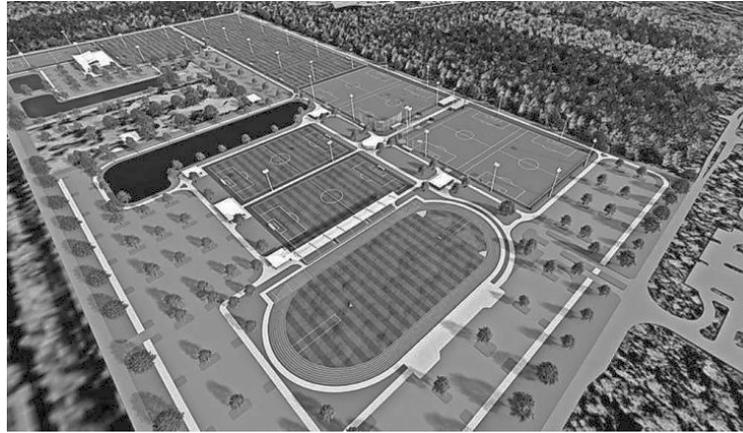
The complex would be located along County Road 16A in the western portion of St. Johns County, just inland from the St. Johns River.

The area, located south of Bartram Trail High School and west of Toco Creek High School, is among several burgeoning regions in a rapidly-growing county: As estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau, St. Johns County's population from April 2020 to July 2022 increased from 273,427 to 306,841, a rise of more than 12 percent in just over two years.

The location is roughly 25 to 30 miles south of downtown Jacksonville, and only a few miles from the Shands Bridge linking St. Johns and Clay counties.

As planned, the complex would include the following:

- Up to 15 soccer fields: nine natural grass, one artificial turf for professionals and five multi-purpose synthetic fields that could also be used for sports including baseball and lacrosse.



A rendering of the proposed JAXUSL training site and soccer complex in St. Johns County. PROVIDED BY JAXUSL

- An eight-lane athletics track and mini-stadium, with plans for Special Olympics and regional events. The athletics venue would include bleachers for up to 3,000.

- Training headquarters for the men's and women's USL teams, which would use two of the grass fields and the professional turf field.

- Additional amenities such as walking trails, playground and picnic sites and parking.

The plan for a park development on County Road 16A area is not new. In a presentation prepared by Osports, Catalyst Design Group, Perez Planning Design and CHW Professional Consultants, dated March 2023 for the county's recreation advisory board, the property is designated as the 40-acre Central St. Johns Sportsplex with plans for eight fields. Located near the Shearwater and Silverleaf neighborhoods, the Central St. Johns Sportsplex is among four parks — the Northwest, Northeast and Central

Community Parks are the others — scheduled for development in the county's master plan.

The JAXUSL proposal would nearly double the number of fields from the original report. Livingstone said that JAXUSL would plan to contribute \$5 million to the site's development, and said that the professional club's involvement would make the project eligible for further funding through a professional sports facilities tax under Florida law.

The plan must still clear further hurdles. Livingstone said JAXUSL is hoping to complete a land swap for a 33-acre plot controlled by the Florida Department of Transportation, land that is currently designated for a future retention pond. In addition, the project is subject to additional evaluation from the county prior to final approval. The parties would also have to reach an agreement about the park's operation and maintenance.

If those steps are cleared, Livingstone foresees a timetable in which the club

could break ground on the new site in early 2024, ahead of a potential opening in 2025.

SOCCER DESTINATION

The plan, Livingstone said, intends to make St. Johns County into a soccer destination for more than just the professional game.

Citing a study by a Tampa-based consultant, the club envisions that the sports complex would produce an estimated annual economic impact between \$15 million and \$20 million, including regional youth tournaments.

"They're coming in for two or three nights, buying a hotel room, going out to eat, going out to movies and things like that," Livingstone said. "So that money adds up."

In addition, the site could also attract teams from northern USL clubs, Major League Soccer or even overseas as a base for preseason training. Counting youth competitions, JAXUSL estimates up to 30 events per year could take place at the site.

"These (youth soccer) tournaments are pretty much passing by Northeast Florida," Livingstone said. "They're being held in Atlanta, held in Orlando, but we're kind of missing out on that."

The proposal adds to a flurry of development projects for Northeast Florida sports.

The ECHL's Icemen concluded an \$18 million renovation of the Community First Igloo during the past season, baseball's Jumbo Shrimp are planning a \$25 million upgrade over three years at 121 Financial Ballpark and the Jaguars on Tuesday opened the new Miller Electric Center for NFL training. The Jaguars also announced in June a proposal for a major renovation of EverBank Stadium in the coming years.