Local Investment, Regional Impact

by Gisgie Dávila Gendreau

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The City of Hamtramck calls itself "the world in two square miles." Now, this diverse community where more than 30 languages are spoken wants to be the recreation destination for Michigan residents.

"A place for the kids to play baseball, soccer, cricket, tennis. A place to bike," Hamtramck Public Schools Superintendent Tom Niczay says without taking a breath. "Walking paths; a place where people can exercise; a venue for music concerts; movies in the park - or in the stadium; a place where we can have local art shows. To make it a true destination, not only for Hamtramck residents, but for the entire area."

"I want there to be so much activity that it’s a freeway sign: Hamtramck Recreation District, this exit."

The community is well on its way to achieving that vision, thanks to support from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation and a group of unlikely partners. An $807,000 grant from RCWJF will allow the community to create a master plan and community engagement process for Hamtramck’s 26-acre Veterans Memorial Park, which includes Keyworth Stadium and historic Hamtramck Stadium. The project also created a special partnership between the City of Hamtramck, Hamtramck Public Schools, the Michigan Municipal League, the MML Foundation, Detroit City Football Club, and the Friends of Historic Hamtramck Stadium.

"The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is enthusiastic about supporting the Michigan Municipal League Foundation and partner organizations in this endeavor," said Jim Boyle, vice president of programs and communications for the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation. "We’re particularly excited about how, through collaborative planning among several key entities, this work has great potential to benefit the youth of Hamtramck and the community in general for decades to come."

Officials from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation celebrate the new partnership at a December 2018 press conference.
Engaging the Community

The project will include meaningful community involvement on how to best develop the Veterans Memorial Park area. That could include updating the Historic Hamtramck Stadium, which once hosted the Negro National League Detroit Stars baseball team, to include a cricket pitch, creating bike paths, and setting aside open areas for pick-up soccer. It also includes replacing the Keyworth Stadium turf, which is about a decade past its expected life span.

Lifelong resident Thomas Jankowski, 59, envisions walking paths, public restrooms, landscaping with trees and shade, and a cricket pitch at the current ball field. Jankowski owns two businesses in Hamtramck, the Whiskey in the Jar bar and Empire Disposal, which hauls waste from construction demolition projects. The bar already sees more business on days when the Detroit City Football Club plays at Keyworth and he hopes improvements envisioned in this project will draw even more people to the city—both as customers and residents.

On game days, “it looks like it was 40 or 50 years ago when I was younger,” he said. “Hamtramck has a lot to offer. It’s got a lot of potential. It’s a walking community; a friendly community.”

It’s a vision that will inevitably create opportunities for play and attract visitors for games and other events, said Dan Gilmartin, the League’s CEO and executive director.

“The League strongly supports the concept of placemaking and creating safe spaces for people to gather and enjoy,” Gilmartin said. “That’s exactly what this project does, and we’re pleased to be a part of it.”

The MML Foundation is the League’s fundraising arm and is serving as the project’s fiduciary. It’s also bringing the partners together and helping tell the story of the project’s impact on the community, Gilmartin explained.

Playing Benefits Kids and Community

Located in Wayne County and surrounded almost fully by the city of Detroit, Hamtramck has a population of more than 22,400. Settled by the French, its early residents included a large German-American farming community and, later, Polish laborers who came to work at the Dodge Brothers auto plant. Most recently, the community has attracted a large number of immigrants, many from Bangladesh, Yemen, and Bosnia.

It’s also a place where children don’t have the types of access to sports and other physical activities that research shows leads to “greater cognitive function, positive mental health, better educational outcomes, and lower healthcare costs into adulthood,” according to the Aspen Institutes’s Sports & Society Program State of Play report.

“In an urban environment like Hamtramck, it can be hard to find places to play,” Hamtramck Mayor Karen Majewski said. “Our parks should be places where kids can play and families can gather. This investment is really important in recognizing and developing opportunities for our kids to be active and healthy.”

In the first visible milestone, Bobcats rolled up pieces of the old turf at Keyworth Stadium on a cold, but dry day in early March. While it’s a step that’s galvanized the notoriously rabid Detroit City Football Club fan base— known for their use of red and yellow smoke bombs during matches—it’s a step...
toward creating a public space that is thoughtful and programmed with a mind toward sustainability, DCFC owner and founder Sean Mann said.

“Keyworth is a key part of the community and a region-wide asset,” he said. “This will make Hamtramck a regional destination again. It brings people into Hamtramck where they’ll hit the historic restaurants and shops and make a trip of it.”

The excitement and anticipation for the upcoming changes are palpable as residents talk about the future. On the day the community announced the grant, the high school band played and student athletes—many wearing white football jerseys—milled about excitedly in a large white tent set up on the Keyworth Stadium field.

Speakers shared their vision for the future, stressing the importance of the project’s special sauce: cooperation. Hamtramck High School junior Amra Dzanic, who plays basketball and soccer, and runs with the cross-country team, thanked partners for taking on the project.

“I’m grateful to be able to play on new turf and am excited for what the future is going to hold for the city of Hamtramck and for our Hamtramck athletes,” she said.

“It’s a great feeling knowing that people are willing to invest their time, money, and effort into us. It will inspire us to push even harder to achieve our goals.”

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A Little History

Beyond the recreation opportunities, the two stadiums in Hamtramck’s Veterans Memorial Park hold historical significance.

Built in 1930, Hamtramck Stadium was home to the Negro National League Detroit Stars from 1930-31 and again in 1933. The field was also home to the Detroit Wolves of the Negro East-West League in 1932, and to the Negro American League Detroit Stars in 1937.

The stadium hosted many Negro League legends, including Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, and Detroit’s own Norman “Turkey” Stearnes. Today, it is one of only five Negro League home ballparks still in existence and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2012. In 2014, a State of Michigan historic marker was dedicated at the site.

Owned by Hamtramck Public Schools, Keyworth Stadium was opened by former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1936. Keyworth was the first Works Progress Administration project in the state of Michigan. Today, it is used by Hamtramck middle and high school teams for soccer and football.

The stadium also hosts the semi-professional Detroit City Football Club for more than a dozen matches each year.

The DCFC has been a strong supporter of Keyworth Stadium, including using a crowdfunding campaign to raise more than $740,000 to help make structural improvements to its grandstands, and make renovations to the bleachers, locker rooms, restrooms, and lighting.

They’re also a driver of economic activity for its host city. For the 2018 season, DCFC averaged nearly 5,800 attendees per match, with 85 percent of them coming from outside the city. Hamtramck bars, restaurants, and retailers cite DCFC match days as their busiest days of the year.

Hamtramck School Board Trustee Shoukat Chowdhury and Hamtramck City Councilmember Saad Almasmari are pleased that the master plan project for Veterans Memorial Park is underway.