



SPRINGDALE : Stadium said well ahead of schedule

BY RICHARD MASSEY

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SPRINGDALE — An army of workers in hard hats poured concrete, sawed stone, laid brick and moved dirt Thursday at Arvest Ballpark.

The foul smell of decomposing organic matter seeped through the surface of the red dirt surrounding the stadium bowl. A man operating a small bulldozer equipped with a laserguided grading system prepared the field for sod.

With a March 1 deadline for substantial completion, construction workers moved with purpose and precision.

The Northwest Arkansas Naturals, a Class AA affiliate of the Kansas City Royals, are scheduled to make their first home appearance April 10. If the \$ 32 million stadium isn't ready for the lead up to their debut, ballpark contractor Crossland Construction will have to pay \$ 325, 000.

"We won't even come close to the deadline," James Farmer, Crossland's project supervisor, said during a media tour. "We'll get it done."

Crews work from 6 a. m. to 10 p. m. Monday through Saturday and half shifts on Sunday. As many as 112 workers can be on site at any given time. A patchwork of mobile homes, stained with mud and crammed with blueprints and contract documents, serves as the project's nerve center.

Though the ballpark is not complete, Crossland and the subcontractors have made obvious progress since starting in mid-June.

Most of the bleachers are installed, the field will be fitted for sod this week and the party deck behind left field is finished. Drainage beneath the ballpark is in place. Steel frames for concessions and bathrooms on the western concourse are already up, as they are for the facility's administrative center.

Springdale has spent \$ 17. 6 million, or 35 percent of its \$ 50 million budget, on stadium construction and adjacent road improvements. Of that, \$ 9. 7 million went specifically to earthwork and the ballpark, city records show.

Separate contracts for road improvements and the 1, 650-space parking lot are set to conclude by Dec. 31. Progress — despite rain on Sept. 25, Sunday and Tuesday — has Planning and Community Development Director Patsy Christie optimistic.

"We have put together a great team," Christie said, referring to Crossland and ballpark designer HOK Sport. "We're doing well. It doesn't mean we don't have glitches every once in a while that have to be addressed. That's what you'll have in construction."

Ballpark designer Martin DiNitto led reporters down to the bottom row of risers behind home plate. From that vantage point, fans will be about 30 feet from the catcher and separated from the action by only a foul ball net. The curvature of the stadium bowl and its proximity to the field mean the ballpark doesn't have one bad seat.

"You'll never be away from the game," DiNitto said.

The ballpark will feature stone interiors and exteriors, giving Arvest a uniform look and feel, DiNitto said. Much of the stone is coming from a quarry near Dallas.

DiNitto told reporters the facility has an expansive drainage system that can quickly handle severe storms.

"You can have 6 inches of rain before the game, and the field will be dry," he said.

Two party decks and five luxury suites were cut from the 6, 500-seat ballpark to offset a shortfall in the construction budget after Crossland's bid came in \$ 4 million over the architect's estimate. But in the future, "The suite level can be expanded," DiNitto said.

The Naturals are under contract to play in Springdale for 20 years. Voters in July 2006 approved a \$ 50 million bond issue by just 13 votes, 2, 408 t 0 2, 395, to build the stadium and adjacent road improvements.

As the contractors and the architects build Arvest, city officials are taking steps to ensure a smooth arrival for the Naturals.

The City Council is considering an amendment to the fireworks ordinance so pyrotechnics can be shot at the stadium throughout the season, from March to September. Aldermen are expected to vote on the amendment this month.

The City Council approved a \$ 1 million contract for the purchase and installation of concessions equipment in late September.

The Department of Planning and Community Development is creating guidelines for road improvements and the installation of utilities along 56 th Street, the main artery leading to the stadium. Planners expect the area around the ballpark to develop into a commercial center. "It's probably the most exciting project I've ever worked on in my career," Christie, who has her own hard hat, said to a reporter shortly before the tour ended.

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Contact: webmaster@nwnews.com