MSU looks to replace Blakeslee surface

Goal is for new turf by next year

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MANKATO — Maybe next year, the Minnesota State football team won’t have to slip and slide its way past a late-season opponent at Blakeslee Stadium.

Maybe next year, the annual high-school football game between Mankato East and Mankato West won’t be moved because of a muddy field.

Maybe next year, when local football teams are preparing to host playoff games on home fields that are torn up by use and weather, Minnesota State will provide an alternative.

Maybe next year, Blakeslee Stadium will have an artificial playing surface so that many of the weather concerns of the last month won’t be an issue.

“The need here has never been so evident,” Minnesota State athletic director Kevin Buisman said. “Weather is always going to be a factor, and you’ll still be playing in the cold and wet, but at least the surface would be good.”

A project to replace the stadium turf would cost about $1 million, with another $50,000 for new lighting that would be more efficient and less invasive with more events scheduled at the stadium. The university has secured about $700,000 through savings on other student-fee-based projects, transferring annual maintenance costs and private donors, but another $350,000 needs to be raised privately before the end of the year.

“It’s going to be challenging,” Buisman said. “I feel like we have some good prospects in place so I’m going to stay optimistic.”

Local donors Dennis Hood and Jim Sneer have already pledged money and have helped to recruit others. Hood, who donated $25,000 in December, has also hosted fundraisers on behalf of the project.

“I’m a football fan,” Hood said. “I like (coach Todd Hofner), and I like his staff, and I like what they’re doing up there. In the last five to eight years, I’ve gone to a lot of games, not only at Minnesota State but also in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. A lot of those teams have turf, and for Minnesota State to move forward, they also need turf.”

Hood said the success of the football team, as well as many of Minnesota State’s other programs, has made it an easier sell because it’s become more fun to be associated with the Mavericks.

“I think couple of people are going to come forward, and it’s going to happen,” he said.

Nine of the 14 programs in the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference play on artificial surfaces, which could create a recruiting disadvantage. As the Mavericks are enjoying their most successful season in history, playoff games could be held at Blakeslee Stadium later this month, bringing into question the condition of the grass.

“The Mavericks rarely practice inside the stadium to save the turf, but with the end of daylight savings time, it’s getting dark about 5 p.m., and practices generally don’t start until after 3 p.m.” Hofner also said that the condition of the practice field, especially in the spring, creates a safety issue.

“We had a bunch of hamstring issues (last spring) that stayed with those players through the season,” he said.

Hofner said that with potential playoff games coming up, the Blakeslee surface won’t be in championship form.

“The maintenance staff does a great job of making it the best it can be,” he said. “But it’s grass. It tears, and it doesn’t heal much at this time of the year.”

Buisman added that a new surface would allow the university to host high-school games throughout the season and especially at playoff time. University club and intramural teams would be allowed to use the facility, and other athletic teams might be able to use the field when weather makes other surfaces not usable.

“Right now, we have Minnesota Vikings training camp, five or six football games and one high-school football game,” Buisman said. “(Blakeslee Stadium) sits empty the rest of the year.”

He said that bringing more people to campus is positive for the university and surrounding businesses.

Buisman said that alumni might be solicited, and there have been talks with the Vikings about contributing to the project, but he said that he looks at the NFL organization as the deal-closer.

On Friday, the Section 2AAAA championship game between Mankato West and Hutchinson would likely have been played at Blakeslee Stadium, but it will be played at Todmorden Field, where the surface has taken a pounding through use and weather.

“I’m feeling more and more confident each day,” Hofner said. “We’re seeing more contributions on a daily basis, and there’s a lot of momentum. But we still need to find donors to finish the project.”