

Fit for a fight

New fitness club joins battle to get Grand Rapids in shape

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Curt and Lisa Schmidt never have joined an athletic club, but they liked what they saw at a preview of the massive new MVP Sportsplex in Kentwood.

The Grand Rapids couple has lots of choices close to home.

Southeast Side athletic clubs are in a battle to bulk you up and tone you down.

The addition of MVP Sportsplex to the crowded athletic club scene is shaking up the market.

This week, MVP opened its preview center in the former Woody's Market, 1100 East Paris Ave. SE and will begin signing up members Nov. 13.

"It looks like we are going to join (MVP)," Lisa Schmidt said. "We liked the newness and the new digital equipment. I've been to other area clubs with friends and we visited the MAC (Michigan Athletic Club) and I really liked what I saw with MVP."

The new \$17 million, 96,000-square-foot MVP Sportsplex is offering \$50 enrollment fees through the end of November.

The normal enrollment fee is \$200. The club, at East Paris Avenue and Burton Street SE, is expected to open in March.

Not to be outdone, East Hills Athletic Club, which is just down East Paris from MVP, and its sister club, the Michigan Athletic Club, also in the neighborhood, are offering free enrollment in November.

Both are owned as for-profit health clubs by Saint Mary's Health Management company. MVP is owned by the DeVos family, with Spectrum Health as a partner. Both East Hills and MAC have undergone substantial renovations in recent years. East Hills opened its new fitness center Tuesday.

Although each of the three downplay competition, all are trying to capture the workout dollars from some of West Michigan's most affluent communities. The athletic clubs draw from Cascade, Ada and East Grand Rapids.

MVP looked closely at the feasibility of the project, traffic in the area and household income, said Benny Hardouin, director of operations.

"This is still a very growing, happening area," he said. "There are a lot of deconditioned people in the Grand Rapids area. This market can definitely bear us.

"We don't necessarily see ourselves as competing. But the community of Grand Rapids will be better off for us."

Despite the investment, MVP is trying to lure new members by keeping their fees in line with other area clubs.

"We want to promote health and wellness in the area and we're trying to keep prices at a value rate," Hardouin said.

Much of the MVP Sportsplex will mirror the programs at RDV Sportsplex, the 365,000-square-foot fitness facility the DeVos family founded in Orlando, Fla., in 1998 in a joint venture with Florida Hospital.

The West Michigan facility will include two full-court gyms; six indoor tennis courts; a five-lane, 25-meter pool; indoor warm water therapy and family pool; and outdoor family pools with slides.

The fitness center will have more than 300 pieces of equipment; a supervised children's play area; three group exercise studios including cycling, yoga and aerobic exercise; and sports performance training.

All of the facilities have much of the same equipment and programs. But competition is making each work harder to attract and keep members.

"Obviously, they're a competitor," said John Smallfield, general manager of East Hills and Orchard Hills, another Saint Mary's-owned facility. "We look at competition as healthy. It makes us get better. Our goal is to compete favorably. We have a strong staff. Our facilities are older, but we continue to put capital investment in our clubs."

Smallfield said athletic clubs are tapping into just 15 percent of West Michigan's population. He said there is room for all of them to grow.

Add to the competitive market the new \$29 million David D. Hunting YMCA in downtown Grand Rapids.

That new facility is being built west of U.S. 131 at 475 Lake Michigan Drive NW. It will replace the downtown YMCA at 33 Library St. NE and the West Side YMCA, 902 Leonard St. NW.

The 159,000-square-foot structure will contain more than three times the recreational space as the other Y buildings. It is expected to open in May.

The YMCA's Christian stance and its offer of financial assistance to some who cannot afford the fees make it unique among area athletic facilities.

But President and Chief Executive Officer Ron Nelson said they share common goals: to help people get fit.

"Hopefully all of us are working to improve Michigan's record as the second-most obese state in the country," he said. "We're not talking about trying to get a bigger slice of the pie."

"I hope we're all able to be successful."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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