DUNLAP —

For the second consecutive summer, the area around Dunlap high and middle schools is doubling as a school zone and a construction zone.

Last summer, construction crews built a 17-room addition onto the north end of the high school to ease overcrowding. Work has begun this spring on a $5 million upgrade to virtually all of the district's outdoor sports facilities, work that includes the area's first synthetic turf high school football field, nine new tennis courts and a varsity soccer complex at nearby Dunlap Valley Middle School.

"Honestly, we were overdue for an upgrade. All the bricks and mortar have been put in recent years into classrooms, and rightly so as our district continues to grow," said Duane Peterson, Dunlap High School's director of athletics. "Athletic facilities have fallen behind, but with this upgrade, I think we move from somewhere toward the bottom of the (Mid-Illini) conference to somewhere near the top."

The $5 million upgrade brings to about $26 million the total amount of construction projects the district has in simultaneous operation. Ground has been broken on the construction of Hickory Grove Elementary School on Allen Road in Far North Peoria. That project is being paid for with a combination of the $11.5 million bond issue voters approved last November and about $10 million from a reserve account. The athletics facility upgrade is being paid out of a reserve account, according to Superintendent Jay Marino.

"We bonded for the first phase of the high school expansion (10 classrooms out of the renovated space of the old district offices that opened two years ago) and, at the time, money was cheap and interest rates were great," Marino said. "So instead of $5 million, we bonded for $10 million, and that gave us some money to put away for future projects."

Marino acknowledged a public relations challenge ahead of the district justifying an extensive athletics upgrade, one that includes an expensive, first-in-the-area synthetic turf football field, when the budget for 2011-12 is at a $400,000 deficit.

"The fact there is a deficit doesn't mean the district is broke," Marino said. "The board decided it was better to run a deficit this next year than look for ways to cut out $400,000 when 82 percent of the budget is people, people's salaries and benefits. We were smart and saved through the years and have a healthy reserve."

The addition that opened last year further squeezed out the remaining green space on the district's property.

"That caused a domino effect that runs through all of our outdoor facilities," Marino said.

The addition squeezed out the tennis courts that will result in a tennis complex built in space currently occupied by the soccer field. Plans call for nine courts in the tennis complex, three of them lighted. The soccer field moves to Dunlap Valley Middle School along with the construction of concessions and restrooms there.

Both the softball and baseball fields will be upgraded with new fencing and drainage and will also get a concessions building and restrooms.

But, the biggest excitement seems to be saved for the synthetic turf football field being installed by Turf Solutions of Peoria.

While installation is more costly than a traditional sodded field, Peterson said lower annual maintenance will eventually make up the difference. And the new field will get more use.

"With all the construction of classroom space, we were crowding out green space that we can use for practice and PE and for the band," Peterson said. "The synthetic grass, we don't have to be careful with and use cautiously so it's ready for Friday night's football game. We can get all-day use out of the field every day of the year."