



—Daily Journal Photo By Joe Long

YOUNGSTERS in the Elmora Youth League march toward the field on Morris Avenue for the opening of

a new season, carrying a banner that points to their need for a new site next year.

ELMORA BASEBALL

Kids making final pitch

Youth league opens new season — last at Union site

By **DEBRA La QUAGLIA**
Staff Writer

ELIZABETH — There were no long goodbyes yesterday.

When 260 youngsters gathered to march along North Avenue to open the 13th season of the Elmora Youth League, there was only one thing on their minds — baseball.

For the parents who have nurtured their children and the playing fields on Morris Avenue, it was a bit different. They have been served with notice that this is the last year the league will be allowed to use the baseball field.

The Union property, which is owned by the Kean family, has been leased to the Elmora Youth League for \$1 a year each of the past 12 years.

But now the Keans — cousins and an aunt of Gov. Thomas H. Kean — have indicated they are prepared to develop the eight acres, which are located diagonally across from the Kean-owned Liberty Hall site on Morris and North avenues, along with other property belonging to their family.

That announcement has left league advisers in a quandary as they now search for a new, permanent home for their young players.

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"We need a home," said Michelo Naturile, president of the league. "We've had thousands of kids here. They are here every day, whether they are playing an organized game or a pickup game."

Youngsters from Elizabeth and Union Township, ranging in age from 8 to 18, have participated in the Elmora program since its inception in 1974.

Naturile said the league had organized yesterday's parade as a special farewell before the opening day ceremonies — the impending development not only threatens to make it the last season they play on the field, but also threatens the Elmora program's existence.

Naturile, whose 10-year-old son, Michelo, has played with the league for the past two years, said the group is concerned that it will not be able to find a place to settle.

"The kids in Elmora don't really have any other place to play," said William Malone, who served as league president in 1985 and 1986. "The Kean family has been very nice to let us use this property. We can't fault them for wanting the land back, but our kids need some place to play.

"On paper, the property belongs to the Kean family. But, in their hearts, the people here believe it belongs to them," he added.

Malone has two sons, Billy, 12, and D.J., 10, who play in the league. He, himself, is one of a number of parents who have appealed to city and county officials

for help.

City officials currently are attempting to secure state funding under the Green Acres program to purchase the property, which lies just over the Union Township border. But more than one league official has noted that if the funding is granted — and the city attempts to have the land condemned to purchase it — there will be stiff opposition from the Kean family.

Mayor Thomas Dunn, in a speech to the Elmora Club last week, hinted that officials of the youth league, the city and Union County have discussed the possibility of condemning the land to secure a permanent home for the baseball program.

"If we can sit down with the Keans, county officials and league officials, I am sure we can work out the problems," Malone said. "Some officials said we can try to have the land condemned, but that might involve a substantial (legal) suit with the Kean family."

"I've waited a long time for my son Daryl to be of the age to play in this league," said Freeholder Edmund Palmieri, who also coaches for the league. "I can guarantee this will not be his last year."

Palmieri is one of several Union County freeholders who have pledged their support for the league.

"It is difficult in an urban city to maintain recreational activities. The Elmora Youth League has a tremendous track record that shouldn't and can't end this year," said Freeholder Michael Lapolla. "I am optimistic that we can help them to continue for as long as the kids want to play ball."