

Reclaiming First: A new vision for the future of amateur sports tourism

The Rockford Region has an opportunity to reclaim its first place position as the leader in the amateur sports tourism industry and further grow the sports market. In doing so, we can generate millions of dollars for the local economy and increase tax revenue.

The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Rockford Park District recently unveiled a new vision for amateur sports tourism. The concept calls for the modernization of Sportscore Two and the creation of a new indoor multi-sports facility downtown along the Rock River.

Reclaiming First: An Economic Development Case and Master Plan for Regional Sports Tourism examines the current economic benefits resulting from amateur sports tournaments, the effect and reason for lost events, an analysis of competitive facilities in other communities and recommendations on how to retain, regain and grow regional sports tourism in Winnebago County. You can read the full report at reclaimingfirst.org.

Why is Investment Needed?

The Rockford Region has a long-standing reputation as a leader in the amateur sports market. Tournaments at Sportscore One and Two currently produce \$15 million annually for the local economy and generate an estimated \$1.8 million in direct tax revenue for local municipalities.

However, between 2007 and 2010, the region has seen an 11 percent annual decrease in the number of amateur sports tournaments. The study attributes the loss to the lure of more modern facilities in other communities and deficiencies within our current facilities, including inadequate space, a lack of artificial turf and lighting, instances of flooding at Sportscore One and the downturn in the economy.

If we fail to adequately invest in our current facilities and create new opportunities the erosion will continue to escalate.

Recommendations

By taking a page from the Wisconsin Dells playbook, Rockford could position itself as a year-round sports destination by creating an indoor multi-sport facility. The former Ingersoll building, along the Rock River in downtown Rockford, could be converted into a multi-court, hard surface, air conditioned facility creating an opportunity to host volleyball, basketball, wrestling and other hard surface sports events the region is currently unable to accommodate.

Adding multi-sport fields, lighting and artificial turf at Sportscore Two and an additional artificial turf field at the Indoor Sports Center would bring the facilities up to current industry standards. Artificial turf and lighted fields allow for an increase day and seasonal playing time, eliminate many weather related cancellations and delays, and expand our current tournament capacity. They are also a prerequisite for many tournament organizers.

To accommodate the additional tournament traffic at the Sportscore Two facility, the plan recommends leasing or purchasing the parking lot at Riverhawks Stadium. Under the plan, Sportscore One continues to be used for tournament and local play.

What is the Investment?

The initial investment includes nearly \$30 million for construction and renovation. Selling bonds, securing grants, selling naming rights or raising philanthropic donations would raise money for the project.

While the revenue generated by the tournaments would likely offset the operating costs, there would be a \$2 million annual gap caused by debt services for the bonds. Possible sources of additional revenue to cover the annual gap include naming rights and user-generated taxes and fees, such as an expanded hotel/motel tax or amusement tax.

What is the Benefit?

The study shows that by taking these steps we can generate an additional \$8.8 - \$16.5 million for the local economy and produce \$1 - \$1.9 million in new tax revenue. It would also prevent the further loss of current tournaments, which is estimated at approximately \$500,000 annually.

Next Steps

In January, the Rockford Park District and RACVB will host a public input meeting providing the community with an opportunity to discuss the proposed investments. Our two organizations will also host discussions with area municipalities and request support resolutions for the projects. At the point, a financial plan to fund the initial investments and cover the annual gap will be determined.

Please take some time to learn about this important economic development initiative by visiting reclaimingfirst.org.