

# NORTHWEST ARKANSAS TIMES

## **KNOCK ON WOOD : Minor league sports on NWA's horizon**

Article by Terry Wood

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SPRINGDALE — If all goes to plan, sports fans will be able to enjoy minor league baseball in the summer of 2007 and minor league hockey and a bevy of other events in the winter of 2008 in Springdale.

In a news conference Thursday at the Holiday Inn of Northwest Arkansas, the Springdale Chamber of Commerce introduced the partnership group that is planning to bring professional sports to Northwest Arkansas. "This is an exciting time," said Perry Webb, president and CEO of the Springdale Chamber of Commerce. "This is a defining project for the city of Springdale."

As it stands, the plan is to build a multi-event center just southwest of the junction of Interstate 540 and U.S. 412 that will include a 4,500-seat baseball stadium and a 7,000- to 10,000-seat multipurpose arena. "This all started a year and a half ago as a dream and now it's progressing toward reality," Webb said just before introducing a panel of experts that will conduct a feasibility study on the project.

The study, which is being funded by Gary George, should be completed in two to three months, Webb said.

How would such a project define the city?

Webb said the population of Northwest Arkansas is estimated to be 373,000 and is forecasted to reach 425,000 in the near future. "Once the 450 to 500,000 threshold is reached, there is another whole level of retailers and developers ready to come into the area," Webb said. "There are already two major retail development areas in Northwest Arkansas — Fayetteville and the Rogers-Bentonville corridor. We think a project like this one could spur that new growth to be in Springdale."

Until then, the cost for the project cannot be forecasted, but National Sports Services CEO Matt Perry, whose company would provide primary ownership of the professional franchises that would play in the complex, said similar projects have been constructed for \$45 to \$50 million — \$10 million for the baseball park and \$35 to \$45 million for the arena.

Webb said that while the goal is for the project to be privately funded, that won't be the reality. Webb did insist that raising taxes is not in the plans. "Fifteen years ago, all projects of this nature were publicly funded," Webb said. "The influx of privatization is what has made a project like this possible."

But realistically, we know there is going to be a gap between the cost and the private financing. Public money would fill that gap. But when we first spoke with the project group, we let them know in no uncertain terms that raising taxes was not an option. This is a conservative area that already feels like it is taxed enough. But there are existing revenues and we're going to have to be creative.

But until we get this study back, we're not going to know the total cost."

The feasibility study, being conducted by Convention Sports and Leisure International, will also inform the city and financial backers of the types of sporting tenants that would best fit the area.

"The study from CSL will tell us the optimum amount of seats for the area, and that will inform us on what leagues we choose to partner with," Perry said.

The baseball club would be a member of one of the independent baseball leagues, which are unaffiliated with any Major League organizations, but Perry said the play in the leagues is on caliber with Class AA or A in the affiliated system.

He added that the stadium would be built to accommodate families and groups. Although it would be similar to Baum Stadium, it would include more open space and berm areas where families and groups could congregate. Plans also call for 12 to 16 luxury suites.

Play would begin in mid-May with 45 to 50 home dates. The season would overlap very little with the Razorbacks' baseball schedule.

"In no way do we want to be in competition with

the Razorbacks,” Webb said. “We won’t do anything that will hurt the Razorbacks. We only want to add to the mix.”

Perry said Lincoln, Neb., home of the Nebraska Cornhuskers, has an independent minor league squad with a stadium just across the train track from the Nebraska campus. Both the Cornhuskers and the independent squad routinely sell out.

“It’s two different crowds,” Perry said. “We’re told there is only a 5 percent overlap in the crowds.”

Ideally, the arena would be home to a hockey squad from October to March with 35 to 40 home dates and an indoor football squad from March to August with eight to 10 home dates.

Concerts, wrestling, boxing, trade shows, ice skating and other events would fill out the arena calendar.

There would also be a potential for indoor soccer, lacrosse and basketball franchises.

While a 7,000 to 10,000-seat arena may seem small to those who have enjoyed concerts and other entertainment events in larger cities, Brian Parker of Convention, Sports and Leisure International said smaller venues are becoming more popular among some entertainers and promoters.

“There are only so many Paul McCartneys and Rolling Stones who can routinely sell out a 20,000-plus venue,” Parker said. “Many entertainers like a smaller venue, particularly one that is sold out.”

Parker said acts such as Cher, Crosby, Stills and Nash and James Taylor routinely play venues in the 8,000 to 12,000-seat range.

According to Webb, one of the worst choices that can be made is to overbuild.

“We want sellouts,” he said. “We want there to be a demand for tickets. We don’t want to have a large arena that’s half empty and get into a situation where ticket prices have to be reduced to fill it up. The seating capacity needs to meet the demand.”

While the project certainly has some hurdles to clear, there is great momentum behind it.

With its wealth and growth potential still on the rise, Northwest Arkansas is a sleeping giant just waiting to awaken, according to Perry.

He is confident National Sports Services, which specializes in endeavors like this one, will be able to put together an ownership group — including locals — that will make the project successful.

While nothing is ever a certainty, it appears minor league professional sports is clearly on Northwest Arkansas’ horizon.

*Terry J. Wood is the sports editor of the Northwest Arkansas Times.*

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