

Hoping for a Home Run

Amateur Sports Facilities Becoming Big Business

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

In an Iowa cornfield, a young farmer hears a voice whispering, “If you build it, he will come” and constructs a baseball diamond that provides a second chance for the infamous Chicago Black Sox.

Like Kevin Costner’s character in *Field of Dreams*, communities across Indiana are erecting sports playgrounds, but theirs are designed to host amateur and recreational events. They too are guided by a resounding concept: Build it and they (local, regional and national competitors and spectators) will come.

A few of the many recent and current initiatives throughout the state: a new \$14 million hockey/skating development (the state’s only three-ice rink) in Fort Wayne, a sports and community recreation campus in Westfield and a proposed \$18 million project in downtown Evansville. They, and others, share a common goal: boost sports tourism and generate revenue.

Westfield Mayor Andy Cook says the city plans to build a massive “Family Sports Capital of America” complex.

“Our ultimate goal is to lower our residential tax bills, and in order to do that we must develop industry,” he emphasizes. “This business of sports will be Westfield’s industry. This sports campus is our factory; it just doesn’t have any smokestacks on it.”

How significant a role do amateur sporting events play in the state’s economy?

According to a study – *The Economic Impact of Amateur Sports Tourism in Indiana: A Preliminary Analysis of Selected Sporting Events in 16 Counties During 2006 and 2007* – published in 2008 by the Indiana University Kelley School of Business, the overall economic impact of tourist spending in these areas over the two years was \$100.4 million. Out-of-state travelers accounted for more than half (\$58.2 million) of the total.

The report covers nearly 600 major events (excluding competitions taking place at Hoosier college/university campuses and state high school championships) based on data provided by county sports organizations and convention and visitors bureaus.

Among the findings:

- Events attracted more than one million spectators and participants during the two-year period. Hotels sold 463,338 room nights.
- Basketball was the largest economic engine. Non-Hoosiers contributed 70% of their total economic impact to this sport. Others cited were football (6%), soccer (4%), softball (4%) and track and field (3%).
- Marion County yielded the biggest economic impact at 73% for out-of-county travelers, followed by Bartholomew (6%), Vanderburgh and Vigo (4% each) counties.

Two of the three ice rinks at the recently renamed Lutheran Health SportsCenter accommodate up to 500 spectators each.



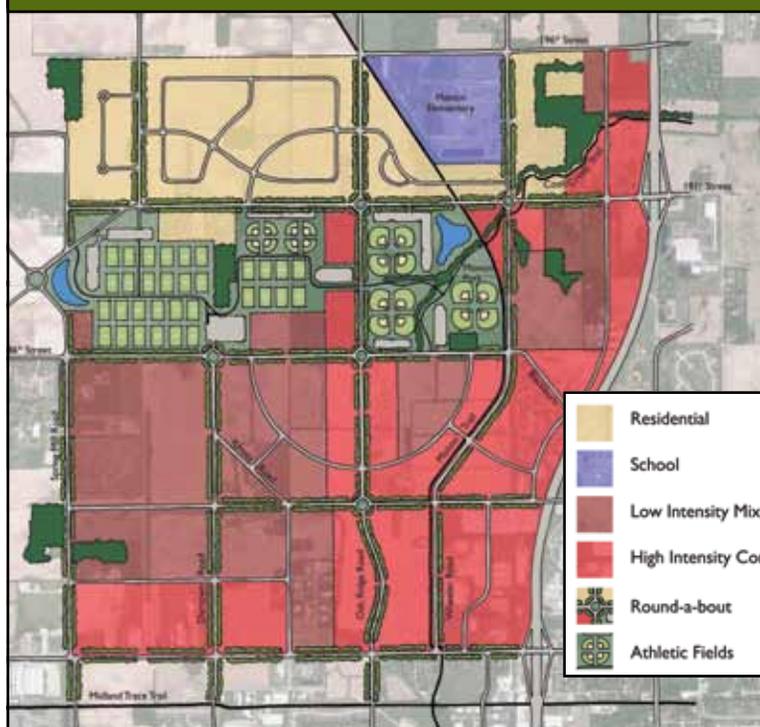
Eat, skate and be merry

Managed by Canada-based Canlan Ice Sports, a new multi-purpose center opened in Fort Wayne last March that’s expected to attract approximately half a million people annually. The 108,000-square-foot building features three NHL-sized rinks (for hockey, figure and recreational skating), banquet facilities, four party rooms and a 16,000-square-foot restaurant.

“We expect the complex to have a significant impact on the hotel, restaurant and tourism industries,” remarks general manager Martin Holleley. “The arena is centrally located right off of (Interstate) 69. The central location will be great for our teenager markets outside of Fort Wayne, like the Chicagos, Detroitis, Cincinattis, Columbuses and so on to

The Family Sports Capital of America

The \$60 million project is expected to attract significant private sector investment to Westfield.



not the country, and it becomes a huge business in terms of hotel stays, restaurants, entertainment and such.”

The 300-acre campus will accommodate a variety of sports – baseball, softball, soccer, football, rugby, lacrosse and more. Construction is scheduled to begin early this year. Another focus is on business development in the surrounding 1,200 acres.

“What we envision will be built by the private sector: the hotels, the restaurants, the entertainment, the sports-oriented hospitals, research,” he shares. “Those are the kinds of tax-producing businesses we see surrounding the campus.”

Cook points out that the area will provide an estimated \$2.3 billion in assessed valuation.

On the northern front

A proposed \$40 million indoor sports venue, also designed for concerts and other events, was recently proposed for Chesterton in Northwest Indiana. It would create approximately 200 full-time jobs.

Several area counties were scheduled to provide developers with low-interest loans to finance the project, courtesy of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009. Few additional details were available as of the deadline for this story.

Nearby, however, is The Fieldhouse-Merrillville – part of a national network of youth basketball training and competition venues – which followed in the footsteps of a highly successful Fieldhouse facility in Fishers in Hamilton County.

“Merrillville was chosen primarily because of its proximity to major metropolitan areas,” explains owner Mark Leyden. “It’s easy to get to from Chicago and from other national locations because you can get easy direct flights in. And from a regional perspective, Milwaukee, Detroit, St. Louis, Memphis, Louisville – all of those metropolitan areas are relatively close.”

come and play.”

Construction on a nearby \$6 million, four-story Marriott hotel is slated for completion by March 1.

“The hotel is located within approximately 100 yards of our complex. It will be ideal for people coming in for tournaments,” Holleley comments. “They can park their car at the hotel and walk to the rink. And, we’re two minutes away from Glenbrook Square Mall.”

The Lutheran Health SportsCenter hosts high school, youth and adult hockey leagues, with the latter two “growing almost daily.” The popular local minor league hockey team, the Fort Wayne Komets, practices at the facility.

It’s not all about hockey, however. In addition to skating, curling and lacrosse are among the activities offered.

A league of its own

Cook calls the Family Sports Capital of America – which will boast various sports facilities and surrounding private sector development – an economic development engine for Westfield.

Recalling initial planning, he observes, “We looked at the various types of sports and came out with the (ones) that would generate our raw material – and our raw material is our tournaments.

“There is a huge destination industry in tournament or travel league sports. Parents follow these kids all over the state, if not the Midwest, if



Tournaments at The Fieldhouse-Merrillville often attract regional and national competitors – and their families.



The Goebel Soccer Complex in Evansville is regarded as one of the top facilities in the state.

In addition to multiple tournaments, the Fieldhouse also offers instructional camps and clinics for children and adults.

Describing the tournaments, Leyden asserts, "They're little economic engines. When our parking lot is filled with 350 cars – almost all from out-of-state – those people can't help but spend some money in Indiana while they're here."

All about Evansville

Efforts to increase sports tourism in Evansville are stirring debate.

The city's \$127 million downtown arena is slated for completion by the end of this year after a lengthy battle over its location. Plans for what's known as The Park involve demolishing Roberts Stadium, the 55-year-old facility the new arena is replacing. Eight baseball/softball fields would be built

in its place and in nearby Wesselman Park.

Proponents tout the economic benefits. Construction of The Park would cost less than renovating Roberts Stadium. Plus, the initiative is expected to produce \$10 million in economic benefits each year. Opponents are concerned about the environmental impact and argue that some officials are supporting the plan simply because they don't know what else to do with the old stadium.

Meanwhile, an existing venue in Evansville already is bringing in tourists – and revenue.

Last November, the Annual Veterans Invitational Soccer Tournament netted approximately \$3.5 million over two weekends. The state's largest soccer competition was held at Goebel Soccer Complex, which features nine Bermuda grass fields and an artificial turf field.

Hoosiers competed against athletes from Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky and other states. The event drew approximately 300 teams, 4,500 players and 10,000 visitors who reserved more than 6,000 hotel rooms.

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Mayor Andy Cook, city of Westfield, at (317) 804-3001 or www.westfield.in.gov/mayor

Martin Holleley, Canlan Ice Sports, at (260) 387-6614 or www.icesports.com

Mark Leydon, The Fieldhouse-Merrillville, at www.thefieldhouse-merrillville.com

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