

PEDAGOGY

Evaluating Citizen Perceptions and Financial Feasibility of a Multimillion-Dollar Sports Complex in a Small Rural Community in the United States

John Miller, Sungsoo Kim, and Chris Croft

Abstract

Sport complexes in the United States are needed to help youths and adults be involved in physical activities to battle being overweight or obese, especially in rural communities. Additionally, conducting youth sports contest tournaments may potentially increase economic impact to the community by drawing spectators from outside of the community. However, care must be taken to prevent them from becoming “white elephants” that may negatively affect the community from both feasibility and sustainable viewpoints. A mixed methods approach was used to determine the desires of the community population to construct a multimillion-dollar sports complex as well as the financial feasibility of such an endeavor. The results of the quantitative survey-based research revealed that the small, rural community in the southern United States was strongly in favor of creating a sports complex. However, using the triangulation qualitative analysis indicated that fulfilling the financial obligations for building the sports complex was not feasible. In particular, the community unemployment rate, future job growth, annual household income, and housing value were significantly below

John Miller, Professor, Sport Management, University of North Florida; Sungsoo Kim, Associate Professor, Business, Communication, and Design Cluster Singapore Institute of Technology; and Chris Croft, Associate Professor, University of Southern Mississippi. Please send author correspondence to john.j.miller@unf.edu

the national average. As a result of these findings, it would not have been financially feasible to construct the sports complex in a sustainable manner. Thus, the city is deprived of physical activities because it cannot afford a sports complex.

Introduction

Sports and community development are intrinsically linked in several ways that can improve the lives of citizens and advocate for a healthy culture. While community development may appear to be distinct from sports, participation in sports and recreational activities provides opportunities for residents, especially those at risk, to advance their health status (Vail, 2007). Socioeconomic status (SES), often assessed by household income, educational achievement, or occupation, is a significant source of health inequalities (Mills et al., 2018). Decreased SES has been related to an increased likelihood of individuals, especially children, being overweight and obese, thereby increasing their morbidity rates (Kishawi et al., 2020; Llewellyn et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2020). To counteract childhood obesity, leisure-time physical activity (also referred to as physical activity or activity) has been identified as an important health behavior (Llewellyn et al., 2016).

Although there are many positive aspects to creating a sports complex in a rural community, several concerns must be addressed. While often associated with developing sports stadiums and arenas for much larger competitions (e.g., mega-sports events), the concept of constructing a “white elephant” sports complex for a rural community must also be considered. Davis (2020) defined the term “white elephant” as “a burdensome or costly objective, enterprise, or possession, esp. one that appears magnificent; a financial liability” (p. 828).

In the sports context, white elephants are usually viewed as failing to manage the potentially increased costs associated with constructing a sports complex. Additionally, a white elephant situation occurs when a long-term practical value is not secured, thereby not being able to pay for long-term maintenance costs with the anticipated revenues (Davis, 2020). As a result, the complex may become obsolete in its use and become a financial burden on the community.

Furthermore, previous research has indicated that financial arguments to build sports facilities, especially in smaller cities, have become less prominent and more intangible (Delaney & Eckstein, 2008; Sapotichne, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this study was to employ a mixed-methods approach to determine whether a small rural community in the southern United States would support and afford the construction of a brand-new, state-of-the-art sports complex.

Review of Literature

Sports Complex Economic Issues

Sports complexes are usually designed to host events, and teams can raise money through fundraising. Hosting sports events can have a positive impact on a community's economic and sociocultural issues (Preuss & Solberg, 2006). Sports and community development are also economically linked when the funds raised from sporting events are reinvested in the local community. For example, hosting sports tournaments often requires ticket sales and concession sales.

Increased funding for community programs and improvements may also result if a portion of the ticket and concession sales is allocated to the city. Additionally, sports tournaments can be held at sports complexes that can often attract teams and fans from neighboring communities and states. These visitors can help bring more revenue into a city a few times a year. Attracting visitors from outside the community, despite the presence of competition at the local sports complex, may be viewed as a crucial strategy for economic uplift and community development (Binns & Nel, 2002; Kim, 2021).

According to Binns and Nel (2002), the key features of local economic development (LED) are that it seeks to encourage economic growth and diversify the local economic base into sectors that typically differ from the traditional sectors. Therefore, hosting sports events at sports complexes is a vital component of LED. However, a concern exists as to whether a rural community can afford to build a top-notch sports complex to attract enough sports activities from outside sources (i.e., teams from other cities) both presently and in the future. In other words, will the sports complex become a "white elephant" in the future?

“White Elephant” Facilities

Although a considerable amount of research has focused on revenue production, facility expenditures have also garnered attention. Andreff (2012) indicated that cost overruns at mega-events (i.e., the Olympics) have been the norm in the construction of sports facilities. Flyvbjerg et al. (2014) reported that cities have persistently justified spending money on creating sports venues predicated on the potential future benefits despite the strong possibilities of cost overruns and lasting issues of economic viability.

A white elephant designation occurs when there is an obvious inconsistency between the impractical and exceedingly grand intentions involved in building large facilities and the failure to afford or manage the facility sustainably (Papanikolaou, 2013). Furthermore, if excessive bids are accepted with large construction costs the facility becomes a liability. While facility projects should incorporate sustainable development using renewable energy sources, white elephants often represent unwarranted public expenditure, as well as the underutilization of the facility (Erten & Ozliz, 2006). Beginning with a regional scale, the location of the sport complex venues in relation to those located urban areas and/or the existence of successful complexes nearby has been shown to have an important bearing on the financial success of the venue (Davis, 2020). Additionally, designing for reusability will help prevent the creation of a white elephant. Reusability is generally thought of as the flexibility or adaptability of the facility to accommodate different sports competitions (Davis, 2020). If improbable expectations substitute common sense, a venue may end up as a white elephant instead of profiting from the host city (Alm et al., 2016). In other words, to prevent a complex from becoming a white elephant, city councils must consider whether the sports complex is affordable for city taxpayers, whether the location of metropolitan cities has a history of successfully hosting competitions, and whether multiple competitions can be hosted at the sports complex.

However, Solberg et al. (2015) stated that “... events are often supported financially by the public sector, and if politicians are guided wrongly by incorrect cost budgets, they may support events that they would otherwise have rejected if the information had been correct” (p. 349). As a result, despite the need to provide activities

to the community, cities may be too optimistic in their desire to construct a sports complex without satisfactory financial support. Thus, the community risks the possibility of the facility becoming a “white elephant” in the future due to incorrect budget estimates and potential use.

Purpose of the Study

A small city in the southern part of the United States proposed building an indoor and outdoor recreation facility at a multimillion-dollar sports complex. The construction of the new facility would take place in two phases. Phase I identified key perceived requisites for outdoor sports activities. This would include a total of 12 baseball/softball fields and five soccer fields (multi-use fields that could be used for football plus track and field). Phase II emphasized the need for indoor sports activities, such as indoor track, bowling, fitness and training area, courts for basketball and volleyball, and a natatorium.

The reason for the proposal was to improve the residents' physical activities (especially for the youth) and quality of life and generate economic impact for the community by building an estimated six-million-dollar sports complex that would attract consumers from outside of the city. The city council requested that the researchers conduct a feasibility study to determine whether community members were in favor of building a new sports complex and to assess its future financial sustainability. Based on communications with city council members as well as individuals from local sports organizations, the proposed complex would include 1) sports requiring indoor/outdoor fields (soccer, rugby, lacrosse, softball, baseball, flag and touch football, and tennis), 2) sports requiring an indoor court play area (basketball, volleyball, cheerleading, gymnastics, wrestling, cheerleading), and 3) individual sports (aerobics, cross-training, running/jogging, and martial arts). Additionally, the financial viability of building a state-of-the-art sports complex was brought into question. As a result, the purpose of this study was to employ a mixed-methods approach to determine if it would be feasible for a small rural community in the southern United States to afford to build a brand new, state-of-the-art sports complex.

The information on health-related issues, as well as the potential impacts (participation, economic, and social), can lead to unaccept-

able results when moving into a community sports complex project without conducting feasibility research (Lyberger et al., 2020). Conducting a feasibility study is an essential step prior to undertaking the design and construction of a project, as it will directly impact the success of the project (Shen et al., 2010). Furthermore, feasibility studies often provide increased comprehension regarding the project's sustainability (Meseguer-Sanchez et al., 2021). Moreover, Hansen and Winther (2013) reported that while smaller communities tend to invest substantially in upgrading present facilities to attract outside visitors, it may present a "costly and poor path to go down" (p. 37). Additionally, public debt can be relatively excessive compared to larger cities (Mason et al., 2007). Thus, the decision to fund a sports complex may be more significant for smaller cities than larger cities that have more resources and can attract more people (Lorentzen & Van Heur, 2013).

Methods

Mixed-Methods Triangulation

Triangulation is a form of mixed methods in research (Heal & Forbes, 2013). Mixed methods provide an added value to the research by increasing the validity of the findings and informing the collection from additional sources (Hurmerinta-Peltomaki & Nummela, 2006). Triangulation was used as a mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2009; Jick, 1979) in this study. The concept of triangulation comprises many possibilities for the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, and the contrasting functions of methodological integration in the research process are even better.

After conducting an interview, the researcher reviews the documents that support the information gathered from reliable online sources, as well as the results of the completed surveys. In other words, the qualitative analysis (i.e., review of documents) may be conducted to affirm or disaffirm the findings of the quantitative analysis (i.e., survey completion). This is supported by Patton (1980), who writes: "The point of triangulation is to study and understand when and why there are differences" (pp. 330–331).

Procedures

The procedures of this mixed-methods study were separated into qualitative and quantitative analyses. The qualitative analysis was divided into two phases. First, the researchers reviewed documents to determine a) the demographic trends of the city, b) popular indoor and outdoor sporting activities, and c) potential competitors. As such, Phase I of the study emphasized understanding the context of the study. To accomplish Phase I, the researcher analyzed the demographic trends of the city's constituency such as city population information, socioeconomic status (SES) of the citizens, accessibility to the city, and area hotel accommodations by scouring information from four sources: the city hall archives, the United States Census Bureau, World Population Review, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The reviewed files were extensive and offered an abundance of information, which allowed the researchers to gain substantial insights to assist in the decision-making process.

Phase II involved observing the use of the existing sports complex. This part included the researchers' review of accessibility issues in the city and the proposed sports complex. Additionally, the researchers reviewed schedules for city league teams and regional tournaments, as well as the timing of these activities (i.e., weekdays, weekends, and the time of day). Finally, the researchers identified potential direct and indirect competitors that could draw teams and spectators away from the city in this study.

Phase III included the researchers meeting with city council members to verify the findings of Phase I and Phase II. Because the city council members were included in checking the data, a participatory approach was used to substantiate the quality of the data. Additionally, by employing a participatory approach, the findings of the first phases were demystified.

Due to the openness of this study, city council members were invited into the world of a researcher. For example, among the questions asked by the council members were the following: Did the researchers understand the context of the situation? What did the researcher write down? Did the researchers exclude anything? If so, why? Where did the researchers find the information? How did the researcher understand what I tried to convey? By communicating the information and requesting that council members read, ques-

tion, and potentially amend it, the researchers offered the council members an opportunity to engage in the process. As a result, a relationship of trust was developed and reinforced.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis included several items. First, the researchers reviewed reliable Internet sites such as the Center on Poverty and Social Policy, Homefacts, the United States Census Bureau, and the World Population Review independently to ensure peer pressure would not be applied. The areas the researchers analyzed included the city population trends, the ethnicity and ages of the citizens, and the population trends of surrounding cities. Second, socioeconomic trends such as poverty rates, homeownership, housing values, unemployment, and job growth rates were identified by the researchers.

Population Information

According to the World Population Review (2024a), the city's population was slightly more than 55% Black or African American and 44.3% Caucasian. More females (54.5%) than males (45.5%) live in the city. Residents of the city have a typical age of approximately 37 years, with 23.7% being under the age of 18 and 18.1% being 65 years or older. Additionally, the World Population Review (2024a) reported that the city's population was 12,224, while the county's population was 21,906. This figure represented a decline of the city and county population of 3.1% over the past seven years and was projected to continue to shrink by 3.1% through 2027. However, retirement communities in the city were projected to increase by about 9.5% by 2027.

The population trends of neighboring counties and larger cities, such as Memphis, TN; Jackson, MS; and New Orleans, LA, are critical to consider, as they may attract residents to attend or participate in events staged at the proposed sports complexes. The surrounding counties experienced an average population decrease of 5.2% between 2010 and 2019 (United States Census Bureau, 2024a-d), while the population of Memphis decreased from 631,200 in 2020 to 610,900 in the most recent US census (World Population, 2024c). The population of Jackson, MS, has decreased from 150,000 to 138,998 in the most recent United States census (World Population, 2024b).

Finally, New Orleans is presently at 356,280, a declining rate from 391,200 in 2020 (World Population Review, 2024d).

Socioeconomic Status (SES) Issues

The investigators visited the United States Census Bureau website to determine socioeconomic information representing the city in this study. Socioeconomic status (SES) is often assessed by poverty rate, household income, and employment status (Shavers, 2007). Additionally, lower SES has been shown to escalate the frequency of overweight, obese individuals and associated sicknesses (Townsend & Scriven, 2014). The overall poverty rate for the city is 30.51%, which is higher than the state average (21.9%) and nearly double the national poverty rate (16.7%). However, 55.8% of the residents own their homes (United States Census Bureau, 2024a).

The city's median household income was \$33,026, and the median housing value was \$81,400, both of which are lower than the US (\$61,937) and state (\$40,528) averages (United States Census Bureau, 2024a). Moreover, 49% of the households in the city had an income of \$25,000 or less, with 22% making between \$50,000 and \$100,000. Additionally, nearby metropolitan areas such as Memphis, Tennessee, and Jackson, Mississippi, had typical family incomes of \$56,595 and \$37,563, respectively. These median annual family incomes are lower than the national median family annual income of \$61,937 (United States Census Bureau, 2024a).

Investigation revealed that the city and county had an unemployment rate of 11.3% in 2021 (United States Census Bureau, 2024a), which was three times greater than the national average of 3.61% (O'Neill, 2024). Moreover, the job growth was reported to be -6.9%, with future job growth of 14.1% (Homefacts, 2020). This information highlights issues that will impact the city council's decisions, as the city's population and surrounding counties are declining, and the incomes of residents may not be sufficient to support the construction and maintenance of the sports complexes. However, income figures from metropolitan areas such as Memphis and New Orleans offer the potential promotion as a regional sports complex to attract youth and adult travel teams, parents of athletes, and spectators from beyond the city.

Accessibility Issues

Competitions at the proposed sports complex included a range of indoor and outdoor team as well as individual activities. Among these competitions could be youth and adult leagues and tournaments, as well as an occasional rental of one or more complex areas on an as-needed basis. Potential tournament and league teams from outside the city limits may be attracted to participate at the sports complex and will often be less interested in the local demographics and income characteristics. Instead, it is reasonable to assume they would be more concerned with the accessibility of the sports complex, the quality of restaurants and hotels, and other local attractions in the hosting city.

The city in this study is relatively accessible for visitors via rail and highways but not by air. For example, Interstate 55 is a major interstate north-south highway connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the Great Lakes. It runs through the heart of the county, connecting the region from Memphis to New Orleans. Moreover, Amtrak offers a daily railway passenger service. While a 7,000-foot lighted runway is nearby, the closest commercial airport is more than eighty miles away. The proposed sports complex is located in a city approximately one hundred miles north of the state capital. Furthermore, the city is approximately 300 miles from two major metropolitan cities: New Orleans, Louisiana, and Memphis, Tennessee. Thus, the city's location is within a four- to five-hour driving distance from well-populated cities that can draw participants for youth and adult competitions.

Hotel Accommodations

The hotels in the city, such as Hampton Inn & Suites, Comfort Inn & Suites, and Holiday Inn Express, were geared toward middle-class, economically conscious visitors. For example, the room prices at these hotels range from \$71 to \$123 per night. However, there were no high-end, five-star hotel chains (e.g., Hilton) in the city. Despite the lack of five-star hotels, the prices for hotel rooms fit well within the income of most of the targeted population (e.g., youth and adult individual and team sports competitions). Local attractions include recreational and sporting activities such as boating, fishing, and hiking in a state park or lake that is accessible to the public. Yet, there

was a lack of entertainment or historical events in or nearby the city. Thus, the city does not project an elevated level of sporting tourists.

Direct Competitors

Direct competitors serve the same target market with related products and services (Kotler et al., 2014). In this study, direct competitors for a new sports complex include the city park and recreation department facilities. The park and recreation department manages public facilities that include seven baseball and softball fields, a swimming pool, a playground, a pavilion area, three concession areas, restrooms, an office area, and a maintenance building. Historically, the park and recreation department has hosted a number of youth and adult baseball and softball leagues and tournaments.

Another potential direct competitor is a city youth league. The youth league is a privately owned and operated (nonprofit) league that provides baseball and softball opportunities for children aged five to 16. The league has approximately 900 members, comprising 650 baseball players and 250 soccer players. The youth league receives its operating capital from registration, sponsors, donations, and post-season tournaments. The city youth league currently offers softball and baseball to roughly eight hundred children divided into sixty teams. The local youth athletic league has previously hosted the State World Series and All-Star State Tournament. Annually, the local youth athletic league sponsored regular baseball and soccer league competitions for youths in the neighborhood.

An additional direct competitor is a private golf and racquet club that offers golf, tennis, and swimming. Bermuda grass is used on the greens and fairways, and the facility also features a driving range, a pro shop, two tennis courts, and a swimming pool. The facility hosts approximately five local golf tournaments each year, has over 100 members, and offers two levels of membership. The first option is a social membership that includes access to the tennis courts, pool, and restaurant, while the second option is a golf membership that includes full access to all the facility amenities.

The Boys & Girls Club in the city offers services to area boys and girls aged 6 to 18, with approximately 30 current members. The club's primary focus was on weekday events in the late afternoon and evenings and weekend events throughout the summer. Their main service is recreation, which they provide through outdoor areas and

playgrounds. Their organization does not sponsor organized sports or leagues.

Indirect Competitors

Indirect competitors serve the same target market with a range of products and services, or a different target market with comparable products and services (Downing et al., 2019; Lyberger et al., 2020). The communities that represent indirect competitors are over 65 miles away. The first indirect competitor features innovative fields capable of accommodating city, county, and tournament participants. The facility includes 10 baseball fields and 16 soccer fields. Additionally, the facility can be utilized for four youth-size flag football fields for children ages 7 to 12. The facility also hosts more than 25 baseball and soccer tournaments annually and is home to the Oxford Park Commission youth and adult outdoor sports. The second indirect competitor operates a complex with a total park acreage of 200 acres across all seven parks, including the Sportsplex, which spans approximately 20 acres. It is a multipurpose facility featuring four lighted youth softball fields with 250-foot fences, four lighted adult softball fields, and seven lighted soccer fields.

A third indirect competitor is located less than 10 miles from the Gulf Coast beaches. The facilities are spread across two distinct areas, encompassing more than 100 acres in total. The sportsplex is comprised of ten baseball/softball fields as well as a public playground. This facility hosts city league baseball and softball games, as well as other tournaments, including the USSSA Global World Series. Another facility in the area features five lighted soccer fields and a concession building used by the city league and high school sports teams. Additionally, the Sportsplex features two overflow parking lots, batting cages, concession pavilions, a children's playground, and a scenic reflection pond. The facility's event center is approximately 90,000 square feet.

Quantitative Analysis

Instrument Development

A quantitative analysis was conducted to determine the needs or desires of the community (Hassan, 2000). Organizations should conduct surveys to understand the demand for their product

(Hildebrand, 2014). To determine the perceptions of building a state-of-the-art sports complex among the city constituency, the researchers developed a 32-item Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, and 7 = strongly agree). The development of the questionnaire was guided by a combination of existing literature (Davis, 2020; Lyberger et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2020; Taks et al., 2015).

A pilot test was also conducted to establish question sensitivity, understanding, and appropriateness (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The input from the pilot study was gathered from four sport management graduate students and four faculty members at a large state university in the southern United States. Each of the eight individuals were selected due to their experience in survey analysis. All items were measured, revealing a good internal consistency and reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78, which was deemed acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The data were analyzed using percentages and means as descriptive statistics. Additionally, a Pearson's r was selected because it reveals whether a correlation exists and also the precise degree of the correlation. Moreover, a Pearson's r can indicate the direction (i.e., positive or negative) of the correlation (Creswell, 2014). The level of significance was set at .05.

Population and Procedures

A total of 187 questionnaires were distributed to residents in a face-to-face manner by a mixture of undergraduate and graduate students. An advantage of using a face-to-face interview is the ability to have any question further answered or explained. A strength of this study was the use of extensive face-to-face interviews, with interpretation provided as needed (Bains et al., 2021). As a result, there was a low chance of selection bias and missing data or information bias due to misinterpretation of questions.

The students volunteered to distribute the study as a way to fulfill the university's service component requirement. Prior to distributing the questionnaires, the students were required to attend two one-hour training sessions that included introducing themselves, explaining the purpose of the study, and how to inform the potential respondent that participation was completely voluntary and confi-

dential. The students were placed in groups of two (generally one female and one male, for safety concerns).

The distribution of the questionnaires took place over three spring Saturdays, each generally lasting two hours. Since the researchers assigned students to different neighborhoods of the city for each weekend, there was little concern regarding duplication among the respondents. As a result, of the 187 returned questionnaires, 24 were incomplete, resulting in 163 fully completed questionnaires.

Demographics

Of the 163 respondents, 96 (58.9%) were female, while 67 (41.1%) were male. Concerning ethnicity, 97 respondents (60.6%) identified as African American, followed by 51 Caucasian (white, non-Hispanic) respondents (31.9%). Educationally, 66 (40.7%) completed high school, 52 (32.1%) finished a two-year college, and 24 (14.8%) received a diploma from a four-year college or university. Sixty-one (44.2%) reported an annual family income of less than \$30,000, while 37 (26.8%) reported an annual family income of more than \$60,000. Finally, 140 (86%) believed that the proposed sports complex should be built to increase the physical activities for adults and youth in the community.

Space Availability

Of the 163 respondents, 147 (90%) believed that the city needed more outdoor youth sports facilities. In particular, 73 (45%) respondents disagreed that there was sufficient space to host regional or state youth soccer, baseball, or softball tournaments. Moreover, 71 (44%) of the respondents did not believe that there was enough space to host indoor youth sports tournaments such as basketball or volleyball. Interestingly, 10 (29%) viewed the new facility as a competitor to the existing indoor facility (e.g., YMCA). Thus, the respondents believed that the proposed sports complex was justified due to a lack of available space.

Rental Charges

To increase the amount of “new” money being brought into the community, teams from outside of the city must be invited to play in tournaments. When asked how often the new sports complex tournaments should be used per year, 129 (79%) of the 163 respondents felt that 20 weeks, mainly during the spring and summer when

youths are on vacation from school, would be sufficient. When asked how many tournaments could be held concurrently (i.e., softball and soccer tournaments held on the same dates) at the new sports complex, 91 (56%) respondents indicated that two tournaments could be held simultaneously.

Correlation Analysis

The results of the Pearson's r test indicated that significantly positive relationships existed between gender and constructing the new sports complex ($r(159) = .353, p < .05$). Interestingly, Pearson's r revealed a negative significant relationship between the ethnicity of the respondents and the construction of the new sports complex ($r(159) = -.482, p = .001$). A final correlation was revealed, with another negative correlation between the respondents' income and the construction of the sports complex ($r(159) = -.545, p < .001$). No other relationships were identified.

Discussion

Research can assist policymakers and community members in evaluating whether community members desire a new sports complex and whether the community can financially support such an endeavor (Lyberger, 2020). The need for sports complexes in rural settings is important for several reasons, including increased physical fitness and a decrease in obesity. Ensuring success, as well as the long-term financial viability of the project, is paramount. However, by highlighting the health benefits of the sport facility projects, proponents may use value-based contentions to legitimize the decision to build the facility (i.e., influence legitimacy) (Sant & Mason, 2019). Such value-based claims often cause emotional or moral reactions (Green, 2004), which serves to offer the project as a way to influence the public to "buy in" to the need. As a result, proponents argue that the need for the facility to be built serves the "greater good" of the city (Sant & Mason, 2019).

Lawson (2005) indicated that sports, exercise, and physical activity professionals must acquire empowerment and community development capabilities to supply sustainable social and economic development. However, many communities, particularly in rural areas, lack adequate sports complexes to offer their constituents areas for physical activity (Edwards et al., 2014; Hansen et al., 2015; Majee et

al., 2020). Thus, the “greater good” could be represented by the levels of obesity of community members, especially childhood obesity and leisure-time physical activity. However, by perceiving that building a sports facility is for the emotional “greater good,” the community may end up with a “white elephant” if financial aspects are not thoroughly studied (Lyberger et al., 2020).

A quantitative analysis revealed that the proposed sports complex had significant support and a clear need from the community. The findings of this research support the contentions by Soebbing et al. (2016), who reported that citizens appeared to be committed to the belief that new sports facilities would bring significant economic benefits, despite the dearth of corroborating research. Furthermore, previous research has indicated that facilities are being constructed without any acknowledgment of fiscal responsibility for their funding (Delaney & Eckstein, 2008).

Additionally, the types of events that may be hosted at the sports complex are currently popular, which may assist in attracting teams from neighboring communities to participate in tournaments. However, the hypothetical amount of \$16,000 generated per year by tournaments is relatively negligible for the upkeep and maintenance of the complex. Although this sports complex would cater to the local community, it would not be sufficient to host regional tournaments, thereby attracting visitors to the local area. On the other hand, if tournament-based indoor sports facilities are constructed, these complexes normally limit the amount of local community use, thus neutralizing the day-to-day operations being efficient financially. Additionally, this facility may attract local tournaments due to the scarcity of facilities of this nature in the nearby surrounding areas. However, significantly larger start-up and operational costs will exist. Thus, the quantitative analysis indicated positive perceptions for building a sports complex to provide sports activities for community youths, as well as to entice teams from outside the community to compete in tournaments. However, the amount of revenue being brought into the community is by entrant fees.

The correlation analysis offered two interesting results. First, gender was found to be correlated to the construction of the proposed sports complex. As a result, the females in this study believed that the new sports complex should be built. The next correlation

reported a negative correlation between the respondent's ethnicity and the construction of the new sports complex. While the majority of respondents identified as African Americans, the results indicated that the minority population of Caucasian (white) respondents was correlated with the construction of the sports complex. Finally, a negative correlation was found between higher annual family income (i.e., greater than \$60,000) and the construction of the new complex.

The qualitative analysis presented a different picture from the survey research for several reasons. First, the overall poverty rate for the city was slightly more than 30% or nearly double the national unemployment rate, while the community's job growth was reported to be negative in 2020, with the trend continuing in the future. Moreover, the median household income was significantly lower than the state and national averages. Furthermore, the city's population had decreased by 3.1% over the previous seven years, while retirement communities were expected to increase by almost 10% over the next five years. Thus, the ability of city members to pay for the sports complex, both now and in the future, may be characterized as bleak.

Accessibility and hotel accommodation issues were also reviewed. The results indicated that youth and adult teams from the nearest metropolitan cities would need to travel four to five hours by car, van, or bus since an airport does not exist nearby (i.e., more than 80 miles away) in the area of the city in this study. However, the city does have a daily Amtrak railway passenger service, which could take between four to five hours from Memphis or New Orleans to the city in this study. This may present an obstacle, as many weekend tournaments are conducted on Saturdays and Sundays. As a result, unless there is a limit on the number of participating teams, players would need to leave their homes on Friday evening, play on Saturday, and be able to leave on Sunday afternoon to return home at a reasonable hour.

Although the number of youth sports contests has decreased recently because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pierce et al. (2020) reported that participation in youth sports was improving in 2020. However, the same study revealed that more than 40% of the parents believed the COVID-19 pandemic would significantly impact their

sports travel budget in the near future. Thus, while the COVID-19 pandemic vaccines take effect and precautions continue, it remains to be seen whether the number of youth sports events will return to previous levels soon.

Research has shown that people travel primarily for entertainment options (Hu & Ritchie, 1993). Although the primary reason for the participants to be attracted is the city conducting the tournament, another reason the team selects to participate is outside entertainment. However, while potential tournament participants and their families were offered affordable hotel accommodations, there were no entertainment or historical events available in the city. Such a finding may negatively impact teams' willingness to participate in tournaments at the sports complex, especially if the tournaments are conducted over several days.

Conclusion

Several reasons have been identified for the construction of community sports complexes. The presence of the sports complex encourages adult and youth participation in physical activity, which may help decrease obesity and diabetes that afflict many citizens in the community. Moreover, hosting sports events can also enhance the community's brand. Furthermore, hosting regional and state tournaments regularly would attract fans and relatives from outside the community for several days, resulting in a substantial economic impact. However, since the city demographics revealed a poverty, household income, and unemployment rate that are higher than the state national averages, coupled with decreased job growth, the city council members should seriously contemplate whether making a significant investment in a sports complex is worthwhile.

However, if the proposed sports complex were used for 20 weeks during the year for three-day tournaments held concurrently, the amount generated by event registration would be an estimated \$16,000 per year (\$400 event registration x 20 weeks x 2). Of course, more revenue would be generated by the number of nights the team members, coaches, and parents would stay in hotel accommodations. However, due to the discrepancy of the available hotels in the city and the numbers of players, coaches, and parents, as well as the number of rooms they would occupy, a good estimation would be difficult to approximate.

The construction of a sports complex in a relatively poor rural community may provide community residents opportunities to be physically active through individual programs and team leagues or tournaments, thereby potentially increasing health, lifespan, and quality of life for citizens. Additionally, tournaments held on the sports complexes could generate additional revenue for the community. However, based on the results of this study, the proposed sports complex would need to attract considerably more potential users from outside of the city to be viable. As a result, should idealistic expectations and dreams substitute common financial sense, a sports complex may become a white elephant rather than profiting and promoting the region or host city.

References

- Alm, J., Solberg, H. A., Storm, R. K., & Jakobsen, T. G. (2016). Hosting major sports events: The challenge of taming white elephants. *Leisure Studies*, 35(5), 564–582.
- Andreff, W. (2012). The winner's curse: Why is the cost of mega sports events so often underestimated? In W. Maennig & A. Zimbalist (Eds.), *International handbook on the economics of mega-sporting events* (pp. 37–69). Edward Elgar.
- Binns, T., & Nel, E. (2002). Tourism as a local development strategy in South Africa. *Geographical Journal*, 168(3), 235–247.
- Center on Poverty and Social Policy. (2020, October). *Monthly poverty rates in the United States during COVID-19*. <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/news-internal/2020/covid-projecting-monthly-poverty>
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). Mapping the field of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 3(2), 95–108.
- Davis, J. (2020). Avoiding white elephants? The planning and design of London's 2012 Olympic and Paralympic venues, 2002–2018. *Planning Perspectives*, 35(5), 827–848.
- Delaney, K., & Eckstein, R. (2008). Local media coverage of sports stadium initiatives. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 32(1), 72–93.
- Downing, S. T., Kang, J. S., & Markman, G. D. (2019). What you don't see can hurt you: Awareness cues to profile indirect competitors. *Academy of Management Journal*, 62(6), 1872–1900.
- Edwards, M. B., Theriault, D. S., Shores, K. A., & Melton, K. M. (2014). Promoting youth physical activity in rural southern communities: Practitioner perceptions of environmental

- opportunities and barriers. *The Journal of Rural Health*, 30(4), 379–387.
- Erten, S., & Özfiliz, S. (2006). Stadium construction and sustainability: The review of mega-event stadiums (1990–2012). In *1st International CIB Endorsed METU Postgraduate Conference, Ankara, Turkey* (pp. 525–541).
- Flyvbjerg, B., Bruzelius, N., & Rottengater, W. (2014). *Megaprojects and risks: Anatomy of ambitions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Green, S. E. (2004). A rhetorical theory of diffusion. *Academy of Management Review*, 29(4), 653–669.
- Hansen, A. Y., Meyer, M. R. U., Lenardson, J. D., & Hartley, D. (2015). Built environments and active living in rural and remote areas: A review of the literature. *Current Obesity Reports*, 4(4), 484–493.
- Hansen, H. K., & Winther, L. (2013). On a road to nowhere: A comment on amenities and urban and regional development. In A. Lorentzen & B. Van Heur (Eds.), *Cultural political economy of small cities* (pp. 31–43). Routledge.
- Hassan, S. S. (2000). Determinants of market competitiveness in an environmentally sustainable tourism industry. *Journal of Travel Research*, 38(3), 239–245.
- Heale, R., & Forbes, D. (2013). Understanding triangulation in research. *Evidence-Based Nursing*, 16(4), 98.
- Hildebrand, C., Häubl, G., & Herrmann, A. (2014). Product customization via starting solutions. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 51(6), 707–725.
- Homefacts. (2020). *Grenada County, MS unemployment rate report*. <https://www.homefacts.com/unemployment/Mississippi/Grenada-County.html>
- Hu, Y., & Ritchie, J. B. (1993). Measuring destination attractiveness: A contextual approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, 32, 25–34.
- Hurmerinta-Peltomäki, L., & Nummela, N. (2006). Mixed methods in international business research: A value-added perspective. *Management International Review*, 46(4), 439–459.
- Jick, T. D. (1979). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: Triangulation in action. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24(4), 602–611.
- Kim, S. (2021). Assessing economic and fiscal impacts of sports complex in a small U.S. county. *Tourism Economics*, 27(3), 455–465.
- Kishawi, E., Rafiq, R., Soo, K. L., Abed, Y. A., & Muda, W. A. M. W. (2020). Prevalence and predictors of overweight and obesity

- among women in the Gaza Strip-Palestine: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1–8.
- Kotler, P., Bowen, J. T., & Makens, J. (2014). *Marketing for hospitality and tourism* (6th ed.). Pearson Publishing.
- Lawson, H. A. (2005). Empowering people, facilitating community development, and contributing to sustainable development: The social work of sport, exercise, and physical education programs. *Sport, Education, and Society*, 10, 135–160.
- Llewellyn, A., Simmonds, M., Owen, C. G., & Woolacott, N. (2016). Childhood obesity as a predictor of morbidity in adulthood: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obesity Reviews*, 17(1), 56–67.
- Lorentzen, A., & Van Heur, B. (Eds.). (2013). *Cultural political economy of small cities*. Routledge Publishing.
- Lyberger, M., Yim, B. H., & McCarthy, L. M. (2020). Sport facility feasibility study: Assessment, value, and demand. *Asia Pacific Journal of Applied Sport Sciences*, 1(1), 35–50.
- Majee, W., Anakwe, A., & Jooste, K. (2020). Youth and young adults these days: Perceptions of community resources and factors associated with rural community engagement. *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 35(1), 1–24.
- Mason, D. S., Buist, E. A., Edwards, J. R., & Duquette, G. H. (2007). The stadium game in Canadian Hockey League communities. *International Journal of Sport Finance*, 2(2), 94–107.
- Meseguer-Sánchez, V., Gálvez-Sánchez, F. J., López-Martínez, G., & Molina-Moreno, V. (2021). Corporate social responsibility and sustainability: A bibliometric analysis of their interrelations. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 1636–1654.
- Miller, C. E., & Vasan, R. S. (2020). The southern rural health and mortality penalty: A review of regional health inequities in the United States. *Social Science & Medicine*, 268, 113444. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113444>
- Mills, S., Adams, J., Wrieden, W., White, M., & Brown, H. (2018). Sociodemographic characteristics and frequency of consuming home-cooked meals and meals from out-of-home sources: Cross-sectional analysis of a population-based cohort study. *Public Health Nutrition*, 21(12), 2255–2266.
- O'Neill, A. (2024, February 27). *Unemployment in the United States 1991–2022*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263710/unemployment-rate-in-the-united-states/>

- Papanikolaou, P. (2013). Athens 2004. Ten years later the Olympic infrastructure, the cultural Olympiad, and the 'white elephant' syndrome. *Journal of Power, Politics and Governance*, 1(1), 1–9.
- Pierce, D., Stas, J., Feller, K., & Knox, W. (2020). COVID-19: Return to youth sports: Preparing sports venues and events for the return of youth sports. *Sports Innovation Journal*, 1, 62–68.
- Preuss, H., & Solberg, H. (2006). Attracting major sporting events: The role of local residents. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 6(4), 391–411.
- Sant, S. L., & Mason, D. S. (2019). Rhetorical legitimation strategies and sport and entertainment facilities in smaller Canadian cities. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 19(2), 160–177.
- Sapotichne, J. (2012). Rhetorical strategy in stadium development politics. *City, Culture, and Society*, 3(3), 169–180.
- Shavers, V. L. (2007). Measurement of socioeconomic status in health disparities research. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 99(9), 1013–1023.
- Shen, L. Y., Tam, V. W., Tam, L., & Ji, Y. B. (2010). Project feasibility study: The key to successful implementation of sustainable and socially responsible construction management practice. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 18(3), 254–259.
- Soebbing, B. P., Mason, D. S., & Humphreys, B. R. (2016). Novelty effects and sports facilities in smaller cities: Evidence from Canadian hockey arenas. *Urban Studies*, 53(8), 1674–1690.
- Solberg, H. A., & Preuss, H. (2015). Major sports events: The challenge of budgeting for the venues. *Event Management*, 19(3), 349–363.
- Taks, M., Chalip, L., & Green, B. C. (2015). Impacts and strategic outcomes from non-mega sport events for local communities. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 15(1), 1–6.
- Townsend, N., & Scriven, A. (2014). *Obesity: Public health mini-guide*. Churchill Livingstone Elsevier.
- United States Census Bureau. (2023a, July 1). *Quick facts: Calhoun County, Mississippi*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/calhouncountymississippi/PST045219>
- United States Census Bureau. (2023b, July 23). *Quick facts: Carroll County, Mississippi*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/carrollcountymississippi/PST045219>
- United States Census Bureau. (2023c, July 23). *Quick facts: Montgomery County, Mississippi*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/montgomerycountymississippi/PST045219>

- United States Census Bureau. (2023d, July 23). *Quick facts: Tallahatchie County, Mississippi*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/tallahatchiecountymississippi>
- Vail, S. E. (2007). Community development and sport participation. *Journal of Sport Management*, 21(4), 571–596.
- World Population Review. (2024a). *Grenada, Mississippi population 2024*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/grenada-ms-population>
- World Population Review. (2024b). *Jackson, Mississippi population 2024*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/jackson-ms-population>
- World Population Review. (2024c). *Memphis, Tennessee population 2024*.
- World Population Review. (2024d). *New Orleans, Louisiana population 2024*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/new-orleans-la-population>