

Field of Dreams; The Local Impact of Youth Sports

Tennessee Certified Economic Developer Certification Capstone

Carri Beth Rhea
10-3-2024

Introduction

Economically, small rural communities often face distinct challenges. Most of these rural cities and towns are characterized by a small population, lack of job opportunities, limited resources and difficulty with finding ways to trigger economic growth to advance their community. However, the most notable strengths of small rural communities are their community bond, community support, community pride, and their hometown community hospitality. The City of Bolivar is one that exemplifies all of these characteristics and more.

This Capstone project will look at the local impact of youth sports, and how they can have a positive economic advancement on a community; as well as what challenges there may be while investing in this growing industry. As communities increasingly invest in youth sports programs, understanding the economic possibilities of these investments is crucial and how the economic impact of these investments goes far beyond the playing fields. Tourism is a driving force for communities and venturing into the youth sports industry can make a substantial impact on their economy. Bringing new tourism to the area also brings new dollars, however, it is important to understand if the community can support it. The investment of youth sports also plays a vital role in adding economic opportunities for a community through direct impacts such as job creations, new spending at local retailers, restaurants, hotels, and how it acts as a stimulant for other businesses to build in the area. Indirectly, youth sports foster community engagement and pride, which can be translated into an improved economy and enhanced quality of life. The City of Bolivar is investigating increased investment in a multi-use sports facility to help spur new economic growth.

“If you build it, he will come” – 1989 Kevin Costner movie *Field of Dreams*

Bolivar and Hardeman County Overview

Hardeman County is located in the southwestern corner of Tennessee bordering Mississippi, it has 667.8 square miles of land area and is geographically the fifth largest county in Tennessee by land area. The region that would become Hardeman County was originally settled by various Native American tribes, including the Chickasaw. Drawn to the fertile soil, gently rolling hills, and the favorable climate for agriculture the European-American settlers began arriving in the early 19th century. Rapid settlement followed which led to the creation of small farms and communities that set the stage for the county's development as agriculture became the backbone of the economy. Hardeman County is renowned throughout the southeast as the "Hardwood Capital of Tennessee." Today, Hardeman County has an estimated 25,500 residents and is one of the nine distressed counties in Tennessee measured by Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development performance metrics.

The City of Bolivar is the county seat with approximately 5,200 residents and is one of ten municipalities in Hardeman County. The first town in Hardeman County was established in 1823 along the Hatchie River and it was named Hatchie Town. Because of repeated flooding, approximately one mile south of the original location a new site was selected as the county seat. An Act of the Tennessee State Legislature renamed Hatchie Town to Bolivar in October 1825 after Simon Bolivar, a prominent South American revolutionary leader and liberator.

The city's heritage is rich with Southern tradition, reflected in its well-preserved historical architecture and cultural landmarks. Bolivar has three historic districts, North Main Historic District, Court Square Historic District, and Bills-McNeal Historic District all which are

on the National Register of Historic Places. It is also home of the Western Mental Health Institute, a State psychiatric hospital, which was opened in 1889 and is also on the National Register of Historic Places. The historic Hatchie River, which is the longest free-flowing tributary of the lower Mississippi River, flows through Bolivar and Hardeman County. The City of Bolivar will be celebrating their Bicentennial founding, 200 years, in October 2025.

Description of the Opportunity or Need that the project addresses

Small rural communities often face a unique set of economic challenges that can hamper their growth and development. Bolivar, like many others, has been severely impacted by the loss of manufacturing jobs and the general downturn of the economy. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the median household income of Bolivar was \$36,348 which is about half of Tennessee's median household income of \$65,254. The poverty level of Bolivar is at 17.2% compares to the state level of 13.3%. To realize the full capitalization of the economic development assets of the community, Bolivar and Hardeman County must become a more attractive and desirable place to live, work, play, and visit.

The City of Bolivar is entertaining the idea of building a multi-use sports facility, while partnering with West Tennessee Healthcare's plan to build a new hospital and with a second phase of expanding into a multi-use development with a hotel, housing and retail space. The City of Bolivar has approximately 185 acres currently in the area of their Pleasant Run Park and city baseball and softball fields. Throughout this area they are looking to build a multi-use sports facility to accommodate several different sports as well as equipped to hold multiple sports games at one time. The plans for this facility are to be a well-rounded development and be able

to house sporting events for all seasons of the year. The new multi-use sports facility will be conveniently located off of US 64 which is easily accessible for travelers, and a less than an hour drive from I-40. The city anticipates investing in a multi-use sports facility that will stimulate economic growth and tourism with the focus of the plan to capitalize on what the city already has in hand.

According to Sports Events and Tourism Association, in 2021 the total direct spending impact of the sports tourism sector nationally was \$37.9B, which was made up of \$3.7B for tournament operations and \$36.0B sports traveler visitor spending. Sports ETA also reported that in 2021, the sports tourism sector generated \$6.3B in state and local tax revenue with \$2.9B in state taxes and \$3.2B in local taxes. When hosting sporting tournaments, it brings hundreds of families to a town typically traveling with multiple family members. These out-of-town guests will boost the host city's economy by spending money at local shops, restaurants, gas stations, and lodging, thereby boosting the host city's economy.

Applicable TCED coursework

Coursework throughout the University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Service's Tennessee Certified Economic Developer program will be instrumental in the planning and development of a multi-use sports facility for the City of Bolivar. Being able to learn from seasoned professionals and experts in every area of economic and community development who all had a wealth of knowledge to share was very beneficial. The courses taught are intertwined and complement each other. All of the courses were very valuable; however, the following courses are most applicable for this project.

- **TN Marketing and Attraction Course**

This course will aid in the marketing of Bolivar and the new sports facility. The city anticipates the new facility to draw in tournaments and teams from all over Tennessee and neighboring states. The new multi-use sports facility will be conveniently located off of US 64 which is easily accessible for travelers. The location of the facility and attraction it will bring enables Bolivar to use these, along with other tools, to attract new businesses and possibly industries to the community. The importance and knowledge of being able to market Bolivar will be key to economic growth.

- **TN Managing Economic Development Course**

This course enforced the importance of having a vision, implementing the vision, and planning. For this particular project, the city's mayor had a vision of this multi-million-dollar project and has started the implanting phase and planning stages. Being able to set goals with measurable outcomes is essential while planning. Strategic planning is imperative in all economic development projects.

- **TN Business Retention and Expansion Course**

The importance of retaining the current businesses of a community is essential in so many ways. Showing the business owners, you are thankful they are in your community is meaningful and goes a long way. It would be difficult to market your community to new businesses if the ones you have cannot keep their doors open. It is best to start with what you already have. Supporting the small local businesses currently in Bolivar is relatable on a personal level. It is important to be able to bring new fresh businesses into a community however, it is imperative to support the ones already in the community and help them grow.

- **TN Economic Development Basic Finance Course**

The Basic Finance course was very informative on all of the different types of financing out there for entities to utilize. With all of the different types of financing available, entities will have to understand which is best for their project and what limitations or restrictions a particular financing may have. The City of Bolivar is looking to do a mix of financing with other business partnerships, USDA-RD loan, and grants.

Trends Identified in Research

It is unquestionable the economic impact that youth and amateur sports play on a community. This booming industry continues to grow year after year, especially with youth travel sports. An Industry Report in 2021 places its value at \$39.7 billion. The question a lot of communities, specifically rural, want to know is how they can play a part in this industry that is helping others across the country grow their economy. Sports Business Journal reported in the Spring of 2024 that “more than \$1.5 billion was spent on youth and amateur sports facilities from 2020-2023 and another \$1.6 billion is expected to wrap up by the end of next year.” Sports ETA President and CEO stated, “Sports really got the whole tourism industry through the last four years and now destinations are understanding what the long-term impacts sports tourism can mean for a community and they’re jumping into it full heartedly.” While researching the economic impact of youth sports, several cities reported on their success of playing a part of this thriving business. The Jackson Post reported in the Summer of 2024, that the City of Jackson, Tennessee’s Sportsplex had breaking attendance records for their weekend tournaments. It also reported that the Jackson Sportsplex has doubled the number of teams it has served since 2022 with a little over 1,800 teams playing there in 2024. This was a 23 percent increase over 2023. In

2024, they also reported that they welcomed teams from 8 different states, 65 percent of the teams travel at least 1 hour and 30 percent travel at least 2 hours away. This particular sportsplex is currently only designed to host baseball and softball games as well as tournaments with a total of 17 fields and no other sports.

Another report found was from West Michigan Sports Commission, in January 2024 the WMSC reported that the youth and amateur sports tourism had generated \$87.9 million in economic impact for the region in 2023. This was the second highest year in the 16-year history of the organization. It also reported that they had a 60 percent gain from 5 years ago in 2019.

Some of the other economic impact highlights the WMSC reported were:

- 121 sporting events attracted 277,980 athletes and visitors while filling 43,775 hotel room nights. Events increased 7.1 percent and athletes/visitors were up 9.2 percent over 2022.
- 2023 was the highest estimated economic impact for Meijer Sports Complex. The baseball/softball season was the strongest year yet with an estimated economic impact of \$8.7 million. Hosting 21 tournaments, 29,302 athletes/spectators and 4,450 hotel nights.
- Record estimated economic impact for Meijer State Games of Michigan. The Summer and Winter games held 60 cumulative events that attracted 8,700 athletes and generated the highest estimated economic impact of \$3.1 million.
- Raised almost 60 percent of Meijer Sports Complex capital campaign amount. The Meijer Complex is planning a \$11 million expansion.

The website Sportsdestinations.com author, Michael Popke, reported additional key highlights of the 2023 sports tourism industry:

- Sports travelers spent \$52.5 billion in 2023. This included transportation \$13.5 billion, lodging \$10.9 billion, food and beverages \$9.7 billion, recreation \$6.9 billion, retail \$6.5 billion and tournament operations at \$4.7 billion.
- The lodging sector accounted for 21% of all sports-related travel spending.
- Nearly two-thirds of destinations reported that sports programming is the #1 generator of hotel room nights in their community.
- Top 10 Economic Impact States for 2023- Florida, Texas, California, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, New York, Tennessee, Georgia, and Virginia.

One can see that there is no doubt that the economic impact that youth sports can bring to a community if the resources are there. The ripple effects of youth sports for a community can have long term economic benefits. The website Halff.com reported that on average, families spend \$700 to \$1,000 a month on youth sports. The investment of youth sports can not only generate economic opportunities, it can also boost the community's tourism.

Project Description

“Field of Dreams; Local Impact of Youth Sports”

In the 1989 inspirational film, “A Field of Dreams”, actor Kevin Costner portrays a farmer that has a vision of building a baseball diamond in his cornfield. While contemplating this vision, he hears a voice telling him “If you build it, He will come”. Costner builds the baseball diamond to help bridge his past to his future by amending generational gaps and unresolved tensions so that life can progress while respecting the past.

While the City of Bolivar is not in the movie business, they too are looking to build multiple sports fields. A multi-use sports facility could be the economic and tourism landscape planted for the future of Bolivar. The city will reap from the long-term economic impacts for generations to come as well as the health benefits that come from being active. Just believe that, if you build it, they will come, and this too will propel Bolivar into the future while respecting its history.

Who will be Involved?

- The City of Bolivar administration will be the ones spearheading this project, which includes the Mayor, City Council members, department leads, and capable city staff. The mayor had the vision for the multi-use sports facility and is the lead in making this concept become a reality. He will also be the one to delegate specific jobs, keep the council members informed on the development, and make decisions. Other department leaders and their staff will lead the way in clearing the land, dirt work, and demolition of the current fields. The city office staff will be handling paperwork and financials.
- A2H Engineering, Architect, and Planners will be the lead on the designs of the multi-use sports facility and as well as the second phase. The firm will be accountable for keeping everything within budget and making changes when necessary.
- Cumberland Securities has done the initial Financial Feasibility Analysis.
- Younger and Associates, an Economic Development, Research, and Marketing firm, are currently conducting the Economic Impact Analysis.

- Discussions have been held with USDA-RD on applying for a loan through their agency and any restrictions the loan may have. There will also be local lenders, and state grants reviewed for financial help in this project.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of this project is to be able to show the positive economic impact the City of Bolivar can achieve by investing more in youth sports and a multi-use sports facility. The city has started the fundamental planning of this development and has contacted potential partners in this multi-million-dollar investment. If this project is deemed feasible for the city to invest in, it will bring new tourism to the city. The tourism the sports games will bring to Bolivar will help stimulate the economy. The established local businesses will see a positive economic impact on their sales and foot traffic. The city also anticipates that a multi-use sports facility will attract new businesses to the community. The citizens of the City of Bolivar will also benefit from the rise in the economy and the health benefits of having a facility in which to exercise. The goals of this project will be evolving as the city further plans the development as well as adapting to budget.

Project Timeline

The City of Bolivar is currently in the first planning phase of this project. The city mayor has talked to potential partners, worked on an initial design plan with A2H, had a Financial Feasibility Analysis conducted by Cumberland Securities, and currently waiting for an Economic Impact Analysis from Younger and Associates so the two analyses can be combined. Once the

city receives both the Feasibility Analysis and Economic Impact Analysis, then the city will have a better idea of what they can afford. There may need to be adjustments to the initial design plan depending on what the city can afford. The current plan is to start with phase one which will be a multi-use sportsplex, then proceed with phase two with a hotel, housing, and retail space. Articles from the research conducted show that building such facility can take an approximately 2-3 years from time of the groundbreaking. The city anticipates seeing a positive economic impact on the community within the first couple of years. The initial design plans have been completed for the complex with a proposed budget. Once the city receives both the Feasible Analysis and Economic Impact Analysis, they will have a better idea of what the city can afford to invest in a new multi-use sports facility. The city's governing body will need to approve the multi-million-dollar loan from USDA-RD, and any applications submitted for grant funding. Once the funding and approvals are in place, requests for qualifications can be sent, then contracts can be submitted, and the moving of dirt can begin.

Obstacles Faced

The City of Bolivar will be faced with several obstacles to overcome if the plan to build a multi-million-dollar sports facility along with another phase moves forward. Selling an investment this large will no doubt come with all different types of challenges. Some of the biggest hurdles to conquer are listed below.

- It is vital that the city council members, which is the governing body, are on board with the financial and strategic planning of building the facility. Without the support of the city council members the project would not be able to happen. The governing

body will be the ones that vote to approve or disapprove the debt, vote on the submittal of applications for grants, and vote on which contracts will be awarded and to whom. In order to receive and maintain the support of the council members, they will need to be able to see what potential economic impact the facility could bring to Bolivar. The city mayor and city staff will need to keep the council members up to date on the progress of the development as well as any issues that may arise. It will also be important to keep the governing body up to date on the budget of the project. Keeping them informed will help maintain their support.

- Obtaining funds and any regulations that might come with specific funding will be another obstacle. When obtaining funding through loans and grants the city will need to ensure they know all of the restrictions one might have. It is extremely important the city understands what they can afford before applying for funding. The city will need to be sure to assign an individual to keep track of “dos” and “don’ts” during the development of the multi-use sports facility for any funding received.
- Keeping the citizens informed and educated so they will understand how a multi-million-dollar investment can help drive the city’s economic growth and tourism. Having the support of the community is critical when investing this much into a development project. The citizens will help be a driving force in marketing the facility and the city. Receiving the support of local businesses will also be another factor that would include sponsorships, and donations.
- Another major obstacle will be other economic drivers needed to help a multi-use sports facility succeed. The City of Bolivar lacks the adequate lodging needed to accommodate out-of-town guests in the capacity other cities are showing that come

from out of town for sporting events. There are a handful of options currently, however, in order to attract out-of-town guests to stay overnight in Bolivar there will need to be new and family friendly lodging added. The city is in talks with a private investor on potentially renovating a building downtown into a boutique hotel. The city also plans to market to hotel franchises to build a hotel in the second phase of the development. Additionally, the city could use more of a variety of restaurants. There are several in the downtown area or right outside of downtown but they all serve similar dishes. The city has been working with Retail Strategies in marketing the city to bring new franchises to the community. The City of Bolivar and Hardeman County do have other activities for families to do while in town, such as visit Sand Beach Lake, the Historic Luez Theatre, Lone Oaks Farm, and National Bird Dog Museum to name a few. It is important for the city to offer other things for the visiting families to do after their game.

Results and Lessons Learned

The impact of investing funds to build a multi-use sports facility for the city and successfully stimulate the economy as well as bring tourism to the area is still a work in progress. So far, the city has learned what the Financial Feasibility Analysis shows and is currently waiting on the Economic Impact Analysis so the two can be reviewed to see what the city should invest. From the research conducted, other cities have seen growth in their economy and tourism when investing in sports facilities developments. The City of Bolivar will be able to forecast more on the direct and indirect impacts the multi-use sports facility will have in the near future.

Resources

- www.census.gov
- www.sportsfacilitiescompanies.com
- www.tn.gov
- www.tnecd.gov
- www.sportsets.org
- www.sportsbusinessjournal.com
- www.jacksonpost.news
- www.westmisports.com
- www.communityplaymaker.com
- www.sportsdestination.com
- www.halff.com
- 1989 Field of Dreams film