



## County sees potential for sports tourism growth

By Stuart Korfhage  
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When it comes to sports tourism in St. Johns County, leaders here think there are opportunities to grab some “low-hanging fruit,” but it’s unlikely this is going to be a major sports hub in the near future.

Some communities have set themselves up to be centers of activity, especially when it comes to traveling sports teams.

But that takes a heavy infusion of capital to build the necessary facilities. In this county, the government is looking for less maintenance burden when it comes to recreation.

Recently, the county has looked into the idea of charging to use public boat ramps and is considering a land swap with a developer to pay for renovations of its only municipal golf course.

That means for the county to grow sports tourism, it’s going to have to take full advantage of the resources it has.

What does that mean? Probably a focus on bringing in more fishing and golf tournaments rather building anything new.

County Commissioner Paul Waldron, who is a new member of the TDC board, said he’d love to see the county put more effort into landing a couple more fishing tournaments and maybe an extra team sports event or two during slower times of the year in the tourism business.

But he doesn’t see the need for the county to try to become some type of youth sports Mecca the way other areas have.

“I think it would be a good thing (to get more sporting events). It’s not ever going to be the No. 1 focus for St. Augustine/St. Johns County,” he said. “But it would (allow) us to grab some low-

hanging fruit with the events that are out there — if we could draw them to our area especially in certain times of year.”

While it’s probably possible to land a few more events with better focus, members of the county’s Tourist Development Council (TDC) wondered aloud at a recent meeting whether the county is really going to reach its full potential without dedicating at least one position to landing more action in that segment. The TDC is tasked with deciding how to spend funds from the county’s “bed tax” on short-term rentals.

In the most recent meeting, TDC members talked about the possibility of creating a county sports commission or at least creating a position of sports commissioner for the county.

Waldron said he’s unsure whether such a step is needed, but some members of the TDC board, including chair Irving Kass, said an expert in obtaining contracts for recreation events might be worthwhile.

Kass said that’s the best way to show that this destination should be considered a serious player for more events. He said an investment not of millions but hundreds of thousands of dollars would be necessary. In the 2018 fiscal year, the bed tax raised about \$11.5 million for the county.

“My thoughts are, moving into next year’s budget, looking at actually doing some funding for a sports commission itself,” Kass said. “I think if we’re going to be serious about that, we should be looking at a leader in that area. If we want to actually make this is a real business, we’re going to have to actually invest a little capital.”

This came after the board heard a presentation of a sports tourism report from Brandon Dowling of Johnson Consulting. In that report, the county’s lack of a designated expert/leader in dealing with potential events was cited as one of the county’s weaknesses in the market. Nearby counties like Duval and Volusia have such entities.

Among the other weaknesses of the market, according the report:

- Location of hotel clusters
- Relatively high average hotel rates
- Distance between existing facilities
- Lack of true sports tourism facility
- Demand for facilities that exceeds supply

Richard Goldman, president of the county visitors and convention bureau (VCB), said he thinks having that commission or leader could make a difference.

Goldman's organization is contracted by the TDC to promote the county as a destination for travelers. Part of that does include trying to lure sports/recreation events. The county Parks and Recreation Department also participates in sports tourism marketing.

Goldman noted that while the county might not have the huge sports complexes that other places have, it has a huge advantage in the fact that St. Johns County already has great appeal.

Part of what drives organizers to put on events in certain cities is the draw for things to do outside of the competitions. That's part of the success for Walt Disney World's Wide World of Sports complex.

St. Johns County doesn't have the large theme parks of Orlando, but it has many popular attractions to complement the beaches as well as shops and restaurants in St. Augustine, St. Augustine Beach and Ponte Vedra Beach.

"The future is bright for us to expand this category of tourism," Goldman said. "We're working with the assets we have right now. With a few more pieces on the people and expertise side and potentially on the facilities side — or access to the facilities — we believe we can do better."

One of the best opportunities for this coastal community could be beach volleyball, which is growing in popularity. It's also one of the least expensive facilities to build.

The county already has a collection of sand volleyball courts at Pier Park, but that might not be the ideal spot for an event because it's already a busy area most of the year.

Dowling did point out that the town of Tavares built a 21-court sand volleyball complex for about \$400,000 in 2014. He estimated an economic impact of \$1-2 million per year for such a facility here.

However, the county might be able to draw more sports tourism without investing a cent of tax money. Private businesses are already investing in new facilities and upgrades to serve residents and host events for out-of-town athletes.

And why wouldn't they. The report from Johnson Consulting says that in 2016, there were almost 70 million participants in team sports in the United States, which is a 13-percent increase from 2011.

Many businesses are trying to cash in on that trend. Jay Glattig is the commercial real estate developer for Above Athletics, a multi-use athletic facility in northern St. Johns County that has 30,000 square feet of sports facilities and plans to add more.

The facility has already hosted regional events and will add more in the future. There are plans to add three more locations in Northeast Florida in the near future as the area continues to draw recreation participants.

"(The goal) is to link multiple sites for events in the future, especially in St. Johns County where we think there is a lot of opportunity to grow even more," Glatting said.