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Spring training's impact exceeds economic numbers

By Gabriela Rico

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

What would happen if someone removed a \$31 million piece from Tucson's \$27 billion economic pie?

If you do the math and shrug your shoulders, you've just made the argument a little more complicated for preserving Major League Baseball's spring training.

The direct economic impact of Cactus League baseball in Pima County is about \$31 million, according to the 2007 Cactus League Attendee Tracking Survey. That's about 1/1,000th of our local economy.

So why are local leaders struggling to keep the pros here for just a month per year?

"Spring training is more important than economics," said Pima County Supervisor Ramón Valadez. "It's part of our culture, part of Tucson."

If players pack up their bats and balls, it could result in higher prices for area attractions, fewer flights out of Tucson International Airport and companies bypassing the Old Pueblo as an option for relocation, spring-training enthusiasts warn.

Beyond a hit to the pocketbook, the teams' departure would mean a loss of pride.

And that would really hurt.

"If you gain or lose a baseball team, it impacts your local pride," said Pat Patton, senior economist with the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona.

He said the exit of a professional ball team makes people think "somehow the city isn't competitive."

The Chicago White Sox want to leave for a new stadium being built in Glendale. The club's expected departure potentially opens the door for the Colorado Rockies and the Arizona Diamondbacks to get out of their contracts because there won't be three teams in Tucson.

Officials with the White Sox have proposed helping Pima County attract a year-round, national youth baseball tournament in exchange for getting out of their contract, which expires in 2012 unless the Sox find a replacement team.

"We are open to anything that is the economic equivalent," County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said earlier this month.

Members of a new — yet-to-be-named — group formed to save spring

DID YOU KNOW

In 1990, Cactus League games were estimated to bring in \$17.3 million to the Tucson area, a state study said back then.

That study was done shortly before the Cleveland Indians — who had trained in Tucson since 1947 — announced they were leaving for the Sunshine State, in part because of surveys showing Cleveland-area fans preferred to visit Florida over Arizona in the winter.

Source: Star archives

Economic impact of Pima County events

\$100 million

WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship

\$100 million

Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase

\$13.5 million

La Fiesta de los Vaqueros

Sources: Tucson Conquistadores, Metropolitan Tucson Convention & Visitors Bureau, Tucson Rodeo committee

Arriving at \$31 million

This dollar figure on spring training's economic impact came from the 2007 Cactus League Attendee Tracking Survey for which approximately 400 fans,

training have been meeting with representatives from the Rockies and Diamondbacks to gauge their satisfaction with Tucson. They are also lobbying the county to create a sports authority to upgrade stadiums.

They want to secure \$10 million to \$20 million to pay for renovations to Hi Corbett Field and have launched a Web site, basesloadedtucson.com, to solicit public support.

The Pima County Board of Supervisors is expected to vote on creating a sports authority at Tuesday's meeting.

Boasting a major-league link helps keep young professionals in Tucson, which is the top priority for companies looking to relocate, said Joe Snell, president and CEO of Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities Inc.

Spring training boosts tourism by piquing interest from people living in cold-weather cities who see images from Tucson on the evening news, Snell said.

Once they're here, tourists patronize museums, parks and local businesses.

Daniel J. Ryan, executive director of the Arizona Aerospace Foundation, said 20 percent of visitors to the Pima Air & Space Museum and Titan Missile Museum come during the month of March. Both museums get about 200,000 visitors a year, he said.

The loss of spring training would mean cutting back services and jobs, Ryan said.

Some hold a more romantic view of baseball's impact.

Valadez, a native Tucsonan, grew up watching games at Hi Corbett Field and said that got him interested in Little League, which in turn taught him teamwork and kept him out of trouble.

"Kids involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to get in trouble," Valadez said.

He said both Hi Corbett, where the Colorado Rockies train, and Tucson Electric Park have experienced record attendance this season, which shows Tucson wants to keep spring training here — now that we're in danger of losing it.

"Absolutely that has something to do with it," Valadez said of the renewed interest. "This surge in public interest needs to be maintained."

A record 270,745 fans attended spring-training games this year, a 13.7 percent increase from 2007, according to Cactus League attendance figures.

David J. Cohen, a Tucson accountant who is part of the effort to save spring training, said he was pleased to see the public turnout this season.

He said some of the benefits of baseball in Pima County — that are not as obvious to the public — include the fact that tourists who fly into Tucson help add to flight choices from Tucson International Airport.

Also, ticket prices for tourist attractions could rise to mitigate the loss of tourists, he said.

"The economy is a very complicated thing," Cohen said.

Jack Camper, Tucson Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce president, likened spring training to life insurance.

"It's an intangible, but you really need it," he said. "It gives you a long-term benefit."

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The interviews were conducted between March 8 and March 26, 2007.

The \$31 million figure comes from daily spending, including lodging and a Bureau of Economic Analysis multiplier.

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