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Fredericksburg seen as ‘ideal’ city for minor league baseball

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Fredericksburg would be an “ideal location for minor league baseball,” a Washington-based firm told the city’s Economic Development Authority on Monday.

Members of the Brailsford & Dunlavy firm presented the results of a market analysis to determine the prospects of a multi-use baseball stadium in Fredericksburg. The EDA voted last month to spend up to \$18,000 on the study.

[Click here to read the full study.](#)

Fredericksburg officials and local baseball enthusiasts have been making a push to attract a minor league team. Fredericksburg City Council member Matt Kelly said he and fellow Councilman Fred Howe have been talking to representatives of one single baseball team and working through ways to finance a multi-use stadium that is expected to cost about \$28 million not including land acquisition.

Though nobody will confirm it, all signs point to the Hagerstown Suns as the focal point of the local effort. The Suns are a Class-A affiliate of the Washington Nationals, and the team has been looking at potential new homes amid ongoing discussions with Hagerstown, Md., officials on a new stadium. Team majority owner Bruce Quinn has said that he sees a lot of potential for a team in Fredericksburg.

Brailsford & Dunlavy’s report said Fredericksburg is an attractive market because of its fairly large and growing population, its high median incomes and its large number of families with children. Newer minor league baseball stadiums are just as much about providing affordable, family-friendly entertainment as they are about the action on the field, so teams look for communities that have high numbers of households with children.

[Click here for a rendering of the kind of stadium local officials envision in Fredericksburg should](#)

the project proceed.

The study compared Fredericksburg with communities that have similar populations and newer ballparks, including Lexington, Ky., and Fort Wayne, Ind. It projects that the Fredericksburg stadium would attract more than 5,000 fans nightly at first, and still more than 4,000 after the novelty wears off by the fifth year.

Average attendance for the teams in the South Atlantic League, in which Hagerstown plays, ranged in 2012 from 1,366 to 6,031. The Suns had the lowest attendance of any team in the league that year and do so far in 2013 as well, according to Minor League Baseball statistics. Average attendance for the league's 14 teams in 2012 was just under 3,300.

The stadium could host about 25-35 revenue-generating events a year in addition to the roughly 65 minor league baseball games, according to the study. That could include concerts, amateur sports, car shows, weddings and more. Community events would also be held there.

Brailsford & Dunlavey's representatives said stadiums often lead to additional commercial development around the parks and give a boost to local hotels, where teams and fans stay.

The study did not pinpoint an exact location for the local stadium, but most discussion has centered on Celebrate Virginia South, where there are three newer hotels. There has been discussion about putting the stadium on a 38-acre site that was once intended to be home to the National Slavery Museum.

The stadium would boost development efforts at Celebrate Virginia, said Jud Honaker, president of commercial development for project developer the Silver Cos. Conventions that the Fredericksburg Expo & Conference Center are recruiting "would definitely view it as an amenity," Expo Center principal Tom Ballantine said in an email.

There was some discussion at Monday's meeting about trying to do a regional deal that would involve Fredericksburg partnering on the stadium's expenses and revenues with neighboring counties. The Brailsford & Dunlavey representatives couldn't point to any stadium deals involving multiple localities.

Kelly, who attended Monday's meeting, said it's possible that the city could negotiate the deal with a team and then later work out an arrangement with surrounding counties.

Much of the discussion going forward is likely to involve how to pay for a stadium, which usually involves a public-private partnership between the team and government.

The Virginia General Assembly this year added Fredericksburg to the list of localities allowed to retain a portion of sales and use taxes generated by a stadium for a "minor league professional baseball affiliated team" to help pay off the bonds issued to build the facility. A new special real estate tax district that wouldn't involve more taxes on homeowners is also being considered, and the team would contribute part of the financing package.