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Still Looking For My 'Economic Spin-Off'

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Special to The Tampa Tribune

Maybe, if not the perks, it's the misguided belief that sports will actually benefit the community that leads local politicians and voters to subsidize them. Whatever the reason, the idea to use some \$40 million of county taxpayer money to build an amateur sports complex north of Plant City is a good example.

I may be a little biased, given that the only sport that I've ever been a fan of is professional wrestling, and I guess that doesn't even really count.

We've had a stadium complex in Plant City for a long time now, but ever since the Cincinnati Reds quit using it for their spring training, and really even before that, many of us have wondered of what benefit it has been to us.

Now Hillsborough County Commissioner Jim Norman is proposing this new complex just a few miles away from my house.

My last semester at USF, in a reporting class, I wrote a story about concerns over the Tampa Sports Authority's budget shortfall and its practices. Among the topics I covered was the economic impact of government funding for sports events, stadiums and teams.

On the issue of the economic benefit of sports teams and events in the community, Norman told me, "If you're just talking about heads and beds, and you're talking about meals that they purchase and things like that, I believe there's a lot more to having a team in a community."

He cited the competitive frenzy that occurs among communities when a team is on the market as evidence of the economic impact. He also said there are intangible benefits and "economic spin-offs" that come from sports events and teams, like seeing Tampa on national television every week and the pride of having a team. "It gives something back to a community that you can't place in dollars and cents," he said.

Philip Porter, director of the USF College of Business Administration's Center for Economic Policy Analysis, had a different view. According to Porter, there are two types of economists. "There are the independent economists, and there are the economists that have been asked and paid to write impact studies."

He added, "Reasonably enough, the ones that are paid \$50,000 to \$100,000 to write an impact study say that there's all kinds of economic benefits; the independent economists are almost uniformly agreed that this is not a wealth-producing activity."

Porter also cited evidence that the increase in personal income to citizens in communities that have professional sports teams is outweighed by the increase in personal taxes levied. He also showed in an article written for CEPA's publication Policy Outlook that the Super Bowl did not increase sales in the communities the seven times the event came to Tampa and Miami since 1979.

It seemed to me that the debate is between evidence of no tangible economic impact and others' ideas about intangible benefits.

For the story I remained neutral. Now I can opine.

Maybe it's a little different with complexes built by a community for public use, but politicians, and many voters as well, often seem unable to grasp the concept that if an idea is such a money-maker, someone in the private sector will usually end up trying it.

Rather, they lend their support to endeavors that all too often fail. And when no tangible benefits appear, supporters speak of intangible benefits that the community has gained.

There's no doubt that they usually have only the best motives in mind and truly believe there are intangible benefits that are worth taxpayer money. But when it comes to building another sports complex in my neck of the woods, I want to see real benefits, not hope for some gain in community prestige. The evidence seems to weigh against that.

Besides, you can't beat the prestige Plant City already has being "The Winter Strawberry Capital of the World." But then, government has been involved in that as well.

Adam Fowler graduated from the University of South Florida with a degree in political science.

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