



Sports Commission is on a scoring spree

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In just its first full year of operation, the West Michigan Sports Commission has become a solid player in the local hospitality industry.

The events the commission drew here in 2008 resulted in more than a tripling of the room nights at local hotels and motels over what was previously booked from sports tournaments being held in the metro area.

"We more than tripled what was originally being done prior to the sports commission being formed," said Mike Guswiler, WMSC executive director.

"It really is a focus that we have now on looking specifically at youth and amateur sports tournaments and the opportunity to bring these in."

Prior to the commission, which debuted in September 2007, sport events were worth about 5,000 room nights each year.

"We actually measured over 18,000 hotel rooms associated with the groups that we worked with specifically at the sports commission," said Guswiler of 2008.

But Guswiler said his staff isn't sitting on their laurels, as the agency's immediate goal is to top 20,000 room nights.

"Where we start is working with our local community and a lot of the strong sports organizations and clubs that exist out there in providing some added value to some of the tournaments that they're already running. But then, following up from that by working with them to bring new tournaments in — state, regional or national."

"Our focus really is to bring more regional and national events in."

One national event the commission is working to lure here is a first or second round of the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I men's basketball tournament. Despite the size of the event and the prestige that accompanies hosting one, Guswiler said making a bid with the NCAA to be a part of March Madness isn't much different from submitting a proposal for a less glamorous event.

"It's typical of any other bid that we work on. There is a process where there are some bid specifications or request for proposal, as sometimes it's called, where they identify the needs of the community, the venue, logistics of getting teams in and accommodating fans. So it's really walking through that set of specifications, answering questions that they have as an organizing committee and submitting our package," he said.

"You always want to try to differentiate yourself from other potential competing communities. We do that by showing the local support that we have here, who we have backing the bid, and really emphasizing the athlete/fan experience that they'll

One advantage the commission's bid may have is that Van Andel Arena is located downtown. With all the hotels, restaurants and nightspots near the arena, the city could heighten the experience of fans and athletes and gain valuable points with the NCAA.

"The campus that we have to show off to emphasize the fan and athletes' experience really offers a nice, tight-knit, walkable, clean and safe environment. That is something that we have to show off and be proud of, and I certainly think it will make a difference," Guswiler said.

The open years to host the NCAA event are 2011, 2012 and 2013, and Guswiler said the commission will submit a bid for all three years with the hope of landing one. The bid is due to the NCAA by June 5.

Regardless of that outcome, the commission will continue to pursue the less-heralded youth and amateur events. The suburban hotels and motels, mostly those along 28th Street and East Beltline Avenue, are the main beneficiaries of these tournaments, which have proved to be vital to the businesses' bottom lines.

"That primarily is the focus because of the different venues that are used. Most of them are in the outer regions and not necessarily downtown. It varies based on the sport that we're working with and what we'll be utilizing," said Guswiler.

"But just in April alone, we had multiple events on many different weekends that included the Midwest rugby tournament, soccer and AAU basketball, so all of those contributed to people staying in the suburban properties."

Guswiler recently returned from Denver, where the National Association of Sports Commissions Conference was held last month. He said the annual meeting gave him the chance to talk with a number of groups about the local support that sports organizations receive when they bring their events here. He also picked up some leads for future events, which could result in even more room nights.

"We received some interest and we've got some bids out," he said of meetings he had at the Denver conference. "Certainly, we'd like to exceed that 20,000-mark and continue to grow."