

Current Weather

temperature **45°F** overcast clouds



Excitement at inaugural Sports Authority meeting met with doubts about sports facility funding



PHOTO: The Williamson County Sports Authority gathers for the first meeting inside the Williamson County Administrative Complex/ Photo by Brooke Wanser

By BROOKE WANSEER

At the first Williamson County Sports Authority meeting, local business leaders again heard the results from a sports feasibility study conducted in 2016, while discussing how to take steps towards building a county sports facility.

The authority, created by the county during a commission meeting in November 2017, [processes recommendations and helps advise the county's growing interest in youth sports. \(https://franklinhomepage.com/williamson-county-commission-votes-to-create-new-sports-authority/\)](https://franklinhomepage.com/williamson-county-commission-votes-to-create-new-sports-authority/)

Rob Hunden, of Hunden Strategic Partners based in Chicago, presented a sports feasibility study his group conducted. The study detailed the county's assets, like central location and culture, while suggesting possible plans for a multi-million dollar sports complex.

Williamson County Convention and Visitors Bureau President and Chief Executive Officer Ellie Westman Chin has spearheaded the effort to bring more youth sports to the county. This effort was initiated after owners put A-Game Sportsplex in Franklin on the market and removed the facility's ice rinks.

According to the presentation, A-Game's initial closure in early 2016 led to the displacement of 32 sporting events and more than 17,000 room nights lost in the county alone.

Westman Chin said 117 sporting events had been lost in the county between 2014 to 2016.

The tourist draw, along with the construction of five new hotels last year, and seven more to come in the next 16 months, has put the county in the prime location to be a sporting destination

With current county parks like Jim Warren Park and the Williamson County Soccer Complex, tournaments, Hunden said, are "virtually impossible."

The tournament market is becoming competitive, with most mid-size cities trying to get in on the business, though Hunden said many have struggled. He suggested using Grand Park Sports Campus in suburban Indianapolis as a reference point for a future park.

Hunden's presentation included a 24-field, 12 baseball diamond sports complex, with 3,600 parking spaces. The complex would total \$61 million, though he suggested building in phases, and to start with an indoor facility.

Though there are some specialty venues in surrounding areas, like a baseball facility in Hoover, Alabama, Hunden said there were no large, multifunctional venues like the one proposed.

Richard Herrington, the chair of the organization and chair and Chief Executive Officer of Franklin Synergy Bank, asked a question for the room.

"We see the potential, we see all the pluses, how do we do it?" he asked.

Hunden said that was up to the committee to decide the best path forward, but he recommended diving into business planning.

Chin and county Mayor Rogers Anderson have advocated for public-private partnership model in the past.

"Tell us what you need us to do," Anderson said at the meeting.

"We see what needs to be done, but we're struggling with how to get there," Herrington said.

"Today, we have zero dollars, and for us to do something, it's going to take some dollars. This is exciting, but when we start trying to put things together... I'm struggling with the next step," he said.

At the meeting's conclusion, the group voted to apply for 501(c)3 status, which will allow them to give potential donors a nominal tax break.

- Richard Herrington, six-year term: Chairman and CEO of Franklin Synergy Bank
- Stephen Smith, six-year term: Chairman of the Board of Haury & Smith Contractors. Inc.
- Larry Westbrook, six-year term: Attorney, partner at Steltemeier & Westbrook, PLLC
- Jack Elder, four-year term
- Willis Johnson, four-year term: Founder of Copart Inc. and tech company Takl, Inc.
- Sarah Hardee, four-year term: CPA and audit partner with Patterson, Hardee & Ballentine
- Gary Cooper, two-year term: Senior Vice President and Principal-in-Charge of Skanska USA Building, Inc.
- Benjamin Wynd, two-year term: Partner at Smiley Certified Public Accountants

The next Sports Authority meeting will be at 11:30 a.m. at the Williamson County Administrative Complex on Monday, Feb. 26.