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'Sportcation' potential examined for State School property

By RICK GREEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN Apr 10, 2019 Updated 16 hrs ago

LACONIA — Hotel capacity, potential competitors, prospective customers and the lay of the land will all be examined by a company doing a marketing study on building a major sports complex at the former Laconia State School property.

Robin Scott Hunden, president of Chicago-based Hunden Strategic Partners, spoke to the Lakeshore Redevelopment Planning Commission Tuesday about the property's suitability for "sportcations," or major youth sports tournaments that attract athletes and families for competitions and tourism.

These complexes do not pay for themselves, the committee was told.



"The reality of it is that youth sports facilities are very much like convention centers," Hunden said. "They are great pass-through facilities for economic development and impact, but they themselves are not typically profitable and many times they lose money operationally during the year.

"Their debt service, their up-front capital costs and their ongoing support costs for operations usually have to be identified up front from a public sector source, or some other source, typically a hotel tax or something like that."

Speaking during a question-and-answer period at the meeting was Laconia City Manager Scott Myers, the former mayor of Dover. He said that Seacoast city benefited from an Olympic-sized swimming pool and two ice sheets.

These facilities increased business for hotels and stores, Myers said.

“Did the pool pay for itself at the end of day? No, it was supported through some kind of community support, typically through the general fund, property tax payers. Did two sheets of ice pay for itself? That’s still open for debate after all these years.

“But do you look at what it did to increase government support, property taxes, create jobs, the whole balanced package? You kind of see some successes when you look at it as an entire package rather than just look at it as whether a sports operation makes or loses money.”



Hunden said that, like convention centers, there needs to be adequate overnight accommodation space to make major sports complexes feasible.

One possibility to examine is whether athletes could be housed in dormitories on the State School property, while their families stay elsewhere, even at local short-term rentals.

Hunden’s company has done studies for sports complexes around the country, including in locations where there are major business hotels that have many vacant rooms on weekends. This is not the case locally.

“You’re in a unique situation, so we have to think creatively,” Hunden said.

The company will also look at the 200-acre former State School property itself. It will see how many fields or indoor facilities could reasonably be supported by the land at Meredith Center Road and North Main Street, including space needed for parking.

Competitors and customers will also be studied.



Amy Lovisek, assistant director of Laconia Parks and Recreation, said at the meeting that there appears to be strong demand for indoor facilities as well as outdoor venues for soccer, baseball, softball, football and other sports. Participants in youth sports often travel for hours to get to fields and facilities for their athletic competitions.

Scott Crowder, founder of the Pond Hockey Classic in Meredith, said hockey rink time is at a premium in the region, and there is a lack of indoor facilities for other sports.

He encouraged people interested in youth sports to contact Hunden — <https://hundenpartners.com> — to discuss facilities, services and amenities that exist or are needed in the region.

Crowder has two young daughters and is looking forward to the day when they may be involved in sports competitions.

“I don’t want to be driving all over North America and if we have a premier venue in our backyard, that adds to the value of living up here,” he said.