

WEEKEND WAVE

04-22-16



Friday Economic Roundup

Supporters, opponents react to possible spring home in Palm Beach County

By SKYLER SWISHER Sun-Sentinel

Palm Beach County commissioners have heard from supporters and opponents of building a spring training ballpark that would be used by the Atlanta Braves.

Wearing shirts that read "Bring Home the Braves," supporters have urged county leaders to do everything possible to lure the team back to Palm Beach County.

In addition to Palm Beach, the Sarasota-Charlotte County area continues to be one region targeted by the Braves for a possible spring training home. This week, a third Braves option hit a wall: The Collier County Commission rejected a proposal to consider building a stadium near Interstate 75 that could have been a home for the Atlanta team.

In our region, a stadium is under consideration north of Charlotte County off River Road in the North Port area, about nine miles north of Charlotte Sports Park, where the Tampa Bay Rays train.

Last month, the Sarasota County Commission voted 5-0 to authorize the county administrator to continue negotiations with the Braves. Sarasota County officials said Friday they had nothing new to report.

In Palm Beach, the Braves want to build a 10,000-capacity spring training stadium and dorms for younger players, ideally in John Prince Park west of Lake Worth, three team officials told that county's administrator, Verdenia Baker during a recent private meeting.

The Braves' horrible start to the regular season hasn't affected the enthusiasm for the team.

"The economic impact to our area would be phenomenal," said Scott Maxwell, vice mayor of Lake Worth. "I cannot tell you how excited the residents of Lake Worth are."

The club trained in Palm Beach County from 1963 until 1997, when it moved spring training to Disney's Wide World of Sports near Orlando. The team's lease in the Orlando area expires next year.

Opponents argued the county shouldn't be giving away land in a public park, with one speaker mentioning that construction of a baseball stadium could harm the endangered gopher tortoises that live there.

"I am very concerned once again about an attempt to undermine the sanctity of a public park," said Drew Martin, conservation chairman of the Loxahatchee Group of the Sierra Club.

Team officials provided statistics showing the economic impact a spring training stadium could provide, but discussions haven't started on how the stadium could be financed, said Baker, who hosted a roughly one-hour-long meeting at county offices in West Palm Beach.

"They like John Prince Park, but they said they would be interested in looking at other areas," Baker said. "They like the I-95 corridor."

The complex would include about 7,500 fixed seats and 3,000 in berm seating, Baker said, along with six practice fields, a clubhouse and office space.

Palm Beach commissioners asked the team to present a written proposal on how to finance a stadium. The county recently paid about half of the price tag for a \$135 million spring training facility that will be shared by the Houston Astros and Washington Nationals. Team officials indicated they wanted to be in Palm Beach County because of their history in the area and proximity to other team's spring training facilities, Baker said.

At least one other possibility has emerged that isn't getting much attention. Owners of the former Glades County Correction Institution in Belle Glade near Lake Okeechobee have offered half of the 211-acre site for free if the Braves build a spring training complex there.

So far, no takers.

Historic Passenger Traffic at Southwest Florida International Airport

"Southwest Florida International Airport is pleased to report that March 2016 was the single-largest month for passenger traffic in our 33-year history and we experienced record-breaking growth for the first quarter of 2016," said Robert M. Ball, A.A.E., executive director of the Lee County Port Authority.

Just how does a record-breaking March look? With an increase of 7.5% over last year, a whopping 1,269,961 passengers traveled through the airport in March. The busiest airline was Southwest, with nearly 300,000 passengers.

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