Sport Infrastructure in a small community: Residents perceptions of the impact on the community

Cassandra Coble, University of Florida
Kyriaki Kaplanidou (Advisor), University of Florida
Shannon Kerwin (Advisor), University of Florida

Sport tourism
Thursday, May 24, 2012
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Visions)
Abstract 2012-158
4:30 PM

Small scale sport events can be adopted as a community development tool that results in sustainable tourism development of the community (Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2011) but also have an influence on the quality of life of local residents as they may bring a number of economic benefits (Daniels, 2007; Daniels & Norman, 2003) and social benefits to the community (Higham, Hinch, Gammon, & Kutzman, 2002). Thus, the question of legacy of outcomes these events bring, especially the building of new infrastructure becomes worthy of further exploration. The purpose of the study was to examine the benefits and costs of having a sport complex built within a small community and to identify the legacy components from such infrastructural “intervention”.

Small communities can experience the building of new sport facilities that accommodate certain sport events, sport activities, and recreation and leisure programs that target the local and non-local residents. The building of new infrastructure requires financial investments that can have a direct impact on the community support and bring to the forefront questions about long-term benefits and costs of that facility on the community (Siegfried & Zimbalist, 2000). Given the lack of literature on small-scale sport events and infrastructure, the mega event literature was examined. Within this literature, investments related to infrastructure pose concern from a legacy standpoint as they can become “white elephants”, which means sources of continuous financial burden to the local residents (MacAlloon, 2008; Mangan, 2008; Searle, 2002) and a source of uneven distribution of benefits to urban communities involved (Jones, 2001). This observation has certainly met resistance among supporters of mega events who suggest that sport venues can also assist in the community development processes through programs and services (Kaplanidou & Karadakis, 2010; Smith & Fox, 2007). This study is therefore exploratory in nature in order to understand the perceived benefits and costs from residents of a small community in reaction to a newly built sport complex.

The study took place in a southeastern rural community of approximately 5,000 residents (US Census Bureau, 2000). At the time of the interviews, the community had two baseball fields located in separate sections of town and a recreation facility (Facility A) that included sports such as basketball, baseball/softball, and archery. Facility A was intended to be a tourism venture with the purpose of housing events across multiple programs as well as an area for community sport and recreation programming. Facility B, a proposed multi-field baseball complex, is expected to be completed at two phases, with 16 baseball fields built initially followed by an expansion of 6 additional fields in the coming years. The primary purpose of Facility B is to enhance sport tourism in the community. Between June and August of 2011, fourteen residents were randomly selected from the local phonebook and asked for their involvement in the study. A semi-structured interview guide was used to examine community member perceptions of Facility A and Facility B, including economic, social, community, and human capital impacts. A priori analysis utilizing the interview guide was employed, with general and lower level themes emerging from the data.

The findings revealed that, while Facility A was not being used by many of the interviewees, it was viewed positively by community members as it provided a safe place for the youth in the community and brought pride to some of the community members. Facility A was viewed as a modern facility that was not common in comparable communities in the area. Participants indicated that they did not see an economic impact of this facility but did feel that the facility created bonding opportunities for the community members and was a place that sport participants and employees could build human capital. The participants also noted negative aspects of having the facility, including that it brought too much growth, that tax dollars should not be used for sport facilities, and that the facility’s programs were not comprehensive enough (i.e., did not include culture or arts activities).

When discussing Facility B, participants noted that they knew very little about who was involved in the planning of the facility, how the facility was being funded or maintained, and they did not plan on using the facility. The residents felt there would be a positive economic impact on the community, but highlighted that this impact would only be felt
if jobs were given to local residents. They also noted concerns about who would use the facility throughout the year and how the facility would be maintained. Moreover, an number of participants discussed concerns with the influx of people that may result from the facility. Specifically, the ideas that the facility might change the small town that they chose to live in, increase traffic, and bring in undesirable individuals was highlighted. Unlike Facility A, participants did not indicate that Facility B would offer many bonding opportunities for the local residents.

Participants indicated a difference in the two parks as Facility A was perceived as a direct benefit to the community by creating a place for youth to engage in positive behavior and enhancing a sense of community among residents. This community benefit is consistent with previous research concerning positive benefits of recreation facilities in rural communities (Schaumleffel & Payne, 2010). However, interestingly the participants did not recognize the potential tourism and economic benefit of Facility A. This may highlight a gap in the communication between facility stakeholders and the community, as sport tourism is the force behind the developments in this small town. This discrepancy may impact the community’s acceptance of the facility and similar facilities moving forward.

Facilities that are perceived as tourism ventures, such as Facility B, can create expectations of positive economic impact for the residents of the community (Allen, Hafer, Long, & Purdue, 1993) through sustainable tourism which has been a result of such complexes in other communities (Gibson et al., 2011) While this facility brings hopes of economic development, the fear of building a “white elephant” (MacAloon, 2008; Mangan, 2008; Searle, 2002) is a concern, even in this small-scale community sport tourism project. Therefore, it may be important for communities designing such facilities to clarify the expected economic impact and projected maintenance efforts it will employ to continue support of the project.

This research provides a basis for understanding the perceptions of recreation and tourism projects in rural communities and the implications of building such facilities as perceived by community members. Sport tourism ventures in rural communities are understudied, yet their success or failure can greatly impact a community that is reliant on their success for positive community outcomes (Fishwick & Vining, 1992; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Luloff, Bridger, Graefe, Saylor, Martin, & Gitelson, 1993). Future research addressing the long-term impact of sport tourism facilities and the impacts on the community and the residents would enhance our understanding of when, where, and how to involve residents in the sport tourism venture. Additional research and practical implications will be examined.