Expressions of Civic Identity in Relation to a Suburban Stadium District

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Socio-Cultural - Community (Professional Sport) virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Session: Community
Abstract 2020-239

Sports venues and the events that take place within them are engines of social capital because they provide “societies and/or fan nations…opportunities for interaction to members of that group and reinforce and introduce support for their collective identity” (Seifried & Clopton, 2013, p. 54). Even before a sports venue opens, the mere prospect of a new stadium development offers residents a chance to participate in community affairs through the expression of their support of or opposition to the proposed project (Kellison, Sam, Hong, Swart, & Mondello, in press). For venues planned for or located in the urban core, this collective identity may be largely concentrated inside the central city.

Conversely, in rare projects sited outside a major metropolitan center, that civic identity may be anchored elsewhere. One such case is SunTrust Park, the $722-million home of the Atlanta Braves that opened in Cumberland, Georgia, in 2017 (Center for Sport and Urban Policy, 2019). Cumberland is an unincorporated suburb about 13 miles north from the team’s former stadium in downtown Atlanta. Like other projects leveraging stadiums as catalysts for growth in large downtown commercial and residential hubs, SunTrust Park anchored a new mixed-use development called The Battery Atlanta. However, because of its atypical location, it may also serve the function of a suburban downtown. According to Dixon (2015), these suburban centers “evidence a strong civic mission that reflects growing suburban aspirations for community-rich environments. They are generally sponsored by local government, have an unmistakably public character, and are denser and more socially diverse” (p. 123). While usually existing in the urban core, a stadium district situated outside the city center may have additional value by providing a suburban community with the opportunity to form a civic identity.

In light of this distinction, the purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of citizens impacted by a suburban stadium district. Specifically, I analyzed the perceived impact of a stadium development on the local community and considered how the development served as a means through which residents could express their civic identity with the suburban community. Empirical material collected from 134 randomly selected active voters in Cobb County was analyzed using Blair’s (2015) combined approach, a hybrid technique in which aspects of both grounded theory methodology and template coding were applied.

Twenty-one preliminary codes and six categories emerged. The primary themes were established a priori based on three common dimensions of civic identity: membership, rights, and participation. The results of the study indicate voters in Cobb appraised the ballpark district plan within the context of their civic identity.

Rather than thinking about Cobb’s place in the greater Atlanta area, voters focused on the project’s implications on Cobb as an autonomous and sovereign community. Broadly, the results of the study illustrate how a suburban sports venue (prospective or built) can foster a localized civic identity among residents, further developing the suburban community’s political, economic, and social distinctiveness from the wider metropolitan region.