

# Report: Area losing sports tourism game

## CVB consultant calls for cooperation; North Mankato happy to go it alone

By Robb Murray

[rmurray@mankatofreepress.com](mailto:rmurray@mankatofreepress.com)

**MANKATO** — Lost opportunities.

That's the simplest explanation behind the commission of a study on the Mankato area's success, or lack of, in attracting sporting events to town.

Tournaments bring out-of-towners to Mankato. Those folks eat in local restaurants and sleep in local hotels. Occasionally, they shop downtown or in Old Town or the mall.

In short, they bring money.

And the Greater Mankato Convention and Visitors Bureau believes the city and region aren't attracting enough tournaments that can potentially inject the region with that treasured economic impact. Last fall the CVB hired consulting firm Event Partners Inc. to review the region's success in attracting tournaments and the community's assets including sports facilities and lodging. It also analyzed the region's potential for attracting new events and offered advice on which events to pursue for maximum economic impact.

Youth girls sports, for example, are a more desirable target because, on average, more family members come along to watch the games as opposed to boys sports.

Girls sports attract an additional 3.1 visitors per athlete while boys attract .9.

The consultant outlined Mankato's strengths as: good facilities; a central location easily accessible to people in the Upper Midwest; good regional population base and sports interest; disposable community income; solid sports reputation; adequate tourism infrastructure, including 1,000 hotel rooms.

On the flip side, the area has, as the consultant termed it, "factors which must be addressed."

Those factors are: increased competition from other cities

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scheduling conflicts for use of facilities; determining the number and types of organizations available to sponsor and support tournaments; the lack of a sports commission; the need for Mankato and North Mankato to coordinate efforts.

Getting North Mankato to the table might be difficult.

"We are working on our own initiatives," North Mankato City Administrator Wendell Sande said.

The city has had an agreement with the Sports Institute, a private sports training company based in Mankato, to attract tournaments to its Caswell facility.

Most recently, it played host to a youth baseball tournament. A week earlier, the state girls softball tournament was played there.

They're now working on hosting American Softball Association tournaments, and a national fastpitch softball tournament is returning in 2012.

Sande said the city also is working with Mankato Area Public Schools to develop a soccer facility on the 40-acre site of the next elementary school. When that facility is complete, Sande said, they expect to be able to attract many soccer tournaments to North Mankato.

They've worked closely with the Mankato United youth soccer organization on that endeavor.

"It's gone extremely well," Sande said of North Mankato's tournament recruitment efforts. " We're very satisfied with what we've accomplished in our work with the Sports Institute."

Anna Thill, director of the CVB, said it's hard to judge if not having North Mankato on board with CVB efforts will help or hurt. If someone comes to the CVB or, down the road, to the sports commission and wants to bring in a tournament that could only be held in North Mankato — horseshoes, for example, at Wheeler Park — Thill said she envisions being able to work smoothly with North Mankato.

One of the main goals of the sports tournament effort right now, Thill said, is to let everyone know they have no intention of taking over anyone's tournaments or events. In fact, they hope to figure out when all the established tournaments are so that they can know what parts of the calendar not to focus on.

The idea: Find those times when hotels and restaurants are empty and bring people to town.

" We're trying to be full capacity all year-round," Thill said of the hotels.

" That's the ideal."

As an example of a city that does a good job, Thill points to Rochester. That city's facilities outclass Mankato's for now, but Thill said they'd like to model Rochester's success.

" They've got a very strong sports commission," she said. " They're able to influence product development, such as new lights on a field, new fields. We're not there."

Paul Gaspar has children who play soccer and softball and he's traveled to many communities and seen many facilities.

He echoed Thill's thoughts on Rochester as a community to emulate.

" We certainly don't have the facilities of a Rochester or the Twin Cities," he said.

" So I think we're behind.

But we still have a good chance if we can get the cities to work together."

Gaspar said he wishes the cities could work together to build a sports complex such as ones he's seen in Woodbury and Blaine.

Dozens of soccer and baseball fields, handful of hockey rinks, softball, tennis — that kind of facility, Gaspar said, would look mighty attractive to any kind of tournament organizer.

Thill said the group plans visits in the coming months to sports organizations, businesses and places with facilities — such as high schools and colleges — to solicit support.