



## ***Boost in Rock River Valley sports tourism tied to tax changes !***

Rockford Star Ledger, IL.

**ROCKFORD, IL.** — Officials proposing a **\$35.7 million** expansion of the region's sports tourism facilities are advocating increasing a countywide hotel tax and a food and beverage tax outside Rockford to help pay for it.

Details of a plan to pay for a transformation of the old Ingersoll building in downtown Rockford into an indoor-sports complex and an expansion of Sportscore Two in Loves Park emerged Monday after months of discussion.

Instead of an increase in property tax or general sales tax, the plan is to target the visitors attracted by the amenities to the region and the industries that stand to benefit from the projected influx of visitors, Rockford Park District Director Tim Dimke said.

"This is a regional proposal," said Dimke, who has worked with Rockford, Loves Park and Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau officials to develop the plan. "This is a proposal spearheaded by five organizations that want to include every community in this county that are going to benefit from these major amateur sports facilities."

### **Shrinking market share**

The Rockford region was a pioneer in the amateur sports industry when it opened the original Sportscore in the early 1980s with eight lighted ball fields, eight regulation soccer fields and more practice soccer fields. Since then, amateur and youth sports have become an industry. Other communities have built newer and better facilities to cash in. The result, officials said, is that Rockford has seen its market share shrink.

Artificial turf fields and lights that ease tournament organizers' concerns about weather and field conditions and allow games to be scheduled late into the night have become highly sought after. And Rockford doesn't have the indoor facilities to compete for large basketball and volleyball tournaments.

Investing in an expansion of sports tourism amenities after five years is projected to net \$16.5 million a year in business for the region, produce \$1.9 million in tax revenue a year and create 250 full-time jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry.

### **Ingersoll overhaul**

A \$10.6 million renovation of the former Ingersoll building, 301 S. Water St., would transform the facility into a premier, air-conditioned, 105,000-square-foot indoor-sports complex. It would include eight tournament-quality hardwood basketball courts that could be changed into 14 volleyball courts.





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***Wrestling, cheerleading and other indoor tournaments would be possible, with the BMO Harris Bank Center serving as a championship venue. The plan would open Rockford to new indoor-sports markets.***

**Sportscore Two** would undergo a \$21.5 million modernization that would add artificial-turf soccer and baseball/softball fields and lights. It would launch the region back into the upper tier of the sports tournament market in the Midwest. Volleyball would move from the Indoor Sports Center to Ingersoll, and a second indoor soccer field would take its place after a \$1.1 million upgrade.

***A \$3.1 million River's Edge Redevelopment Zone grant would be used to defray some of the costs, but there would remain a \$2.4 million gap that must be covered to repay the bonds over 20 years.***

### **Hotel, food taxes**

A Winnebago County hotel tax increase would raise about \$13 million, and a food and beverage tax countywide outside Rockford would raise \$13.8 million over 20 years. Officials would sell naming rights and are pledging \$350,000 a year from tournament revenue to help repay bonds.

Officials said they would also pursue grants, historical tax credits, new market tax credits, capital campaign contributions and other revenue sources. If any of those can be tapped, it would reduce the amount that would have to be bonded.

The plan was being presented to elected officials from each of them Monday night. Resolutions supporting state legislation that would authorize Winnebago County to raise hotel taxes by 2 percentage points throughout the county and create a 0.75 percent food and beverage tax outside Rockford are being sought.

Rockford already pays a 1 percent food and beverage tax to pay for the Harris Center, Coronado Performing Arts Center and similar economic development and cultural efforts. Supporters say instituting a similar tax outside the city would bring parity to the local industry.



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***Raising the taxes would require action by the Winnebago County Board after the state passes the law but not a referendum, officials said. They argue that the Legislature would be giving local representatives authority of the county's destiny.***

### **Resolutions wanted**

***Officials in coming weeks will seek resolutions of support from not only Loves Park, Rockford and the Park District. They will also ask for the backing of the tourism bureau, local labor unions, Roscoe, Rockton, South Beloit, Winnebago, Pecatonica and every municipality they say would stand to benefit, Visitors Bureau CEO John Groh said.***

***"These facilities are for local residents, not just people from Rockford or Loves Park, but people throughout the region use these facilities," Groh said. "And we are going to leverage them to bring in visitors every weekend to help pay for them and support the local economy."***

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