



Bentley Sports Complex a Bixby Bonus

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PARK BRINGS CROWDS: The Bentley Sports Complex keeps adding teams to its roster, so to speak. In 2008 the tournament drew 439 teams; by 2012, the numbers had doubled to 847 teams, which brought an additional 31,000 visitors to Bixby.

The fields of Bixby's Bentley Sports Complex are filled to overflowing these weekends, and Mayor Ray Bowen couldn't be happier.

The 115-acre complex has, for the past few years, been the home of tournaments run by the United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) and the games have done wonders for the financial health of Bixby.

"This year," says Bowen, "the tournaments began the first weekend in March and will continue through early November. I've had merchants and restaurant owners tell me their business has soared from 30 to 70 percent on the weekends, and the wonderful thing is we still have room to grow."

Baseball is the financial anchor for now, but Bowen says they plan to expand the potential for the site, which is named for local businessman Bill Bentley who both sold and donated a large block of land to Bixby to get the sports complex. Bond issues passed by overwhelming margins in 2006 and 2010, and roughly \$10.15 million has been poured into the facility, an investment that seems to be rapidly paying off.

The USSSA tournaments are just the first wave of benefits to Bixby. How much have they grown? Consider, in 2008 the tournament drew 439 teams (another 78 were turned away because the complex had all it could handle) with 6,585 players and coaches and 9,658 assorted parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents and other visitors of various descriptions. They spent money. A number of the teams were local, but they were far enough away to fill hotel rooms, restaurants, stores of various kinds and places of entertainment. The rough estimate of the impact on the Bixby economy was \$110 per player. "That," says Bowen, "is an extremely conservative estimate."

The 2012 figures blow those numbers away. With lights added to several fields allowing play to continue well into the evening, there were 847 teams with 12,705 players and coaches and 18,634 parents and others bringing a total of 31,339 visitors to Bixby. Most came from Oklahoma, but 171 teams came from Arkansas, Texas, Colorado, Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska. The visitors doubled the number of Bixby hotel rooms they had used in 2011. They ate in local restaurants, bought gas, and it is estimated added about \$1.5 million to the Bixby economy. Even with the added facilities, 216 teams had to be turned away. The challenge for future years will be to find a way to include them.

More things are coming. Baseball isn't the only thing that will be offered. "This year we're adding a second quad of softball diamonds which will add greatly to what we can offer in both softball and baseball. With 60 feet between bases, a softball diamond can substitute for a Little League diamond and can be utilized for both sports.

"We're also going heavily into soccer. We currently have 14 soccer fields ranging in size from small fields for beginners to international-sized fields. We are adding four more this summer giving us a total of 18 fields, and we're going to be looking for ways to attract tournaments just as we have for baseball."

The complex offers other attractions for local patrons. There are facilities for such archaic activities as horseshoes and bocce balls. There is also a lavish water park hailed as one of the finest in the state. There are hiking trails that will be eventually joined by others in a huge path that will wind through Bixby, Tulsa and surrounding areas.

One of the things that has Bowen excited is an outdoor basketball facility that can be used in all weather and will go beyond simple basketball and should be ready in late summer or early autumn. "We are looking at everything from three-on-three basketball tournaments to a variation of indoor soccer. The courts will be surrounded by six-foot fences so soccer balls can be played off them. The possibilities just continue to grow."

One hundred and fifteen acres will only stretch so far so the question is, how much can be added? "I think we're currently about 75 percent full but there is other land that can be purchased. One of the things we are looking for is land for practice facilities. With the current usage every weekend we desperately need places where the players can work out; the fields have to have some time to recover between tournaments. We're not done yet."

Bowen feels the importance of the sports complex cannot be overstated. "Bixby is one of the most livable cities in America and this does nothing but enhance our value. We've heard countless compliments from people who might otherwise never have visited Bixby. When they see us, and what we have to offer in everything from our low-crime rate to our outstanding schools, we are enticing many of them to relocate or at least invest here. That's what makes a city prosper: expanding numbers of rooftops and people who want to live here."