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## Baseball study recommends downtown Macon stadium for minor league team

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The company behind a Macon baseball feasibility study is recommending a downtown ballpark as a catalyst for economic development, with the ability to draw at least 250,000 people each year.

B&D Venues, which presented its study to the Macon-Bibb County Commission on Tuesday, estimated a new minor league stadium could generate about \$171 million in economic activity and \$176 million in wages over a 30-year period.

The top three sites, according to Washington, D.C.-based B&D Venues, would be Mid City Square off Second Street, an area off Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Plum Street, and an area that includes Telegraph-owned property on Broadway. The study estimates that 250,000 to 300,000 people would attend ball games and other stadium events during the year.

The report said Macon could support a Class A team, in part because about 350,000 people live within a 30-minute drive from downtown.

B&D, which is under the umbrella of program management firm Brailsford & Dunlavey, scouted eight sites around downtown that could accommodate a 5,000-seat stadium estimated to cost about \$38 million, not including land acquisition, parking or any off-site infrastructure.

"Our personal experience is if people say they aren't going to come downtown, if you make a decision to build a state-of-the-art stadium, attract a (team) ... they'll come downtown. They'll absolutely come downtown," said Rich Neumann, vice president of major accounts for B&D Venues.

The firm's representatives said they were directed to analyze sites that had a direct impact on downtown development. Some commissioners said Tuesday they were surprised to hear that since they thought the study also would examine sites outside the city's urban core.

Macon-Bibb spokesman Chris Floore said the firm wasn't directed by anyone to only look downtown, but that it was a general consensus at a meeting with county officials and B&D representatives that a downtown stadium would provide the most benefits.

Commissioners Gary Bechtel and Scotty Shepherd, however, said they think Mayor Robert Reichert's administration directed B&D to only look at potential downtown sites. "I went to bat (for the study) thinking this would be a comprehensive look, and it wasn't," Bechtel said after Tuesday's presentation.

Neumann, though, pointed out that the trend among many cities is downtown stadiums, which are able to more easily drive revitalization than parks on the outskirts of communities.

"There's no question you can drop ballparks wherever you want and it may be successful," Neumann said. "But if your core driver is (that) you want to attract 250,000 to 300,000 (people) to downtown Macon ... those other projects aren't going to do that."

### **EIGHT SITES RANKED BY COMPANY**

The eight sites B&D Venues examined were rated in areas ranging from accessibility to parking, current and future surrounding development, and property size, according to the report.

The top site, Mid City Square, is described as 15 parcels totaling 7.4 acres that could be able to attract mixed-used development in nearby buildings. The site is bounded by Second, Third and Plum streets, and Pine Street Lane.

The second-ranked site, around Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Fifth Street and Plum Street, is adjacent to the Lofts at Capricorn development. A stadium next to that project could "stimulate" more economic development on the eastern part of downtown, the report said.

The third location, which includes the former Telegraph offices on Broadway, is made up of 13 parcels around Third Street, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Riverside Drive and Walnut Street. The benefits would include a riverfront stadium that's in walking distance to retail and restaurant options, the study said.

Don Bailey, The Telegraph's publisher and president, said this option "would be an appropriate location since it's one of the gateways to the city."

The fourth-ranked site includes the 36 acres around the Macon Coliseum and Wilson Convention Center.

The former Bibb Mill site on Coliseum Drive was ranked the fifth best location by B&D. Reichert has been a proponent of redeveloping the former cotton mill into a baseball stadium surrounded by restaurants, small hotels and a parking deck. The 23-acre site has limits on economic development because it's isolated by the Ocmulgee River. However, the size of the site and being near facilities such as the Macon Coliseum, could attract some development, the report said.

Luther Williams Field, the location that's been home to several Macon minor league teams dating back to 1929, would not be able to attract a minor league team, the report said.

The least feasible sites examined include land around Second Street and Riverside Drive next to the river, and property around the Bibb County jail, the study said.

### **COUNTY OFFICIALS MUST DECIDE NEXT STEPS**

Ryan Conway, project manager for B&D Venues, said a baseball team would tie into the long-term vision for downtown Macon.

"The communities that have a successful team have adopted them as a fabric of their community," he said.

But before building a stadium, which typically involves public funding 70 percent to 80 percent of the costs, the city should already have a deal approved with a team, according to B&D Venues.

The next step for local officials will be to visit other minor league ballparks. Reichert said he wants to see the parks in Columbia and Greenville, South Carolina this spring before county leaders decide whether to pursue a team.

While Macon's demographics would rank in the bottom third of cities with a Class A minor league baseball team, there are benefits in Macon, such as a lower cost of living, that would make attending a game affordable, B&D said in its report.

One of the challenges for Macon would be attracting corporate sponsorships, but there could be a "handful of partners" to help with the project, Conway said.

Ticket sales should cover expenses, and sponsorships should help drive more revenue, Neumann said.

"The Macon market does not have a broad or deep corporate community. But having said that, there are opportunities for a few heavy hitters that believe in a project like this to support it," he said.

For Reichert, the stadium is similar to another Macon facility that officials debated almost 100 years ago -- Macon City Auditorium.

As Macon nears its 200th birthday, he asked this question: "What sort of investment are we going to make to advance the community overall? If not this, what else?"