

Hundreds of uniformed athletes will flood the 27 acres of fields at Jack Allen Recreational Complex as soccer tournaments storm into the city next month.

“Jack Allen’s event calendar this year is slammed. It is bound to make another major economic impact on the city this year,” said Jeff Dunlap, director of Decatur Parks and Recreation Department.

In March, the Jack Allen complex will host three soccer tournaments, the Region III premier soccer competition, Southeast Challenge and Alabama Youth Soccer Association’s Southeast College Showcase.

Kelly Varnell, recreation supervisor for parks and recreation, said youth and college teams from across the Southeast will participate in the weekend tournaments.

The tournaments will translate to filled hotels, said Tami Reist, president of Decatur-Morgan County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“Southeast Challenge we have already booked 255 rooms ... and there will be more to follow,” she said.

For the College Showcase, the bureau booked hotels in Decatur and Madison to satisfy the 508 room requests.

Last March, Decatur hosted the Southeast Challenge and the Southeast College Showcase and generated \$90,681 in lodging taxes, a 60 percent increase compared to the preceding March. With three tournaments occurring next month, Reist said, she believes revenue produced from lodging taxes will exceed last March’s numbers.

GIVING BACK TO CITY

Decatur constructed the complex three years ago to meet the city’s recreational needs. Now the sport is giving back to the city, in the form of tournaments and revenue.

The players sliding, passing and scoring at the Jack Allen complex represent the same people sleeping, eating and shopping at Decatur’s hotels, restaurants and shopping centers.

The recreational complex attracts a range of participants, extending from local soccer leagues to the top tier of the nation’s amateur teams.

When Huntsville’s Rocket City United, a National Premier Soccer League team, formed last year, the search for a venue ensued.

“They initially looked at Jack Allen but it didn’t meet the minimum requirements they needed because there are no locker room facilities,” said Varnell.

After scouring North Alabama, Rocket City United officials returned to the recreational complex in Southwest Decatur. The Jack Allen complex snagged hosting duties for two of the team’s home games in June and a tournament in July.

“We will place tents up for locker rooms like we’ve done at international soccer games,” Varnell said. “I believe the quality of the playing facilities brought them back to Jack Allen.”

The contests will bring teams from Atlanta and Greenville, S.C., to Decatur.

As interest in the recreational complex continues to grow, local interest in soccer also continues to grow.

“Field usagewise, they’ve (Decatur Youth Soccer Association) just about maxed us out,” Varnell said.

The Summer Olympics, scheduled for August, will add to the already substantial soccer base.

“Anytime a sport is played during the Olympics that sport’s popularity has usually been big that year and the next,” said Dunlap.

“Soccer has continually grown every year ... the Olympics may cause the sport to have even more of an explosion.”

An increased need for additional fields accompanies the sport’s increased popularity.

“We have people telling us we need more fields, and we do. We have a hard time fitting all of them (soccer games) in,” Dunlap said. “As the sport continues to grow we will also need more room to grow ... building extra fields will definitely be a possibility sometime in the future.”

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