

BUSINESS JOURNAL

OCTOBER 2020

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PLAY (VOLLEY)BALL!

Convention center courts help spike interest in sports tourism

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Local officials representing city and county government, and tourism-related organizations participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the indoor volleyball and basketball courts at the Paducah-McCracken County Convention & Expo Center.

DAVID ZOELLER | The Sun

Convention center courts help spike interest in sports tourism

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A successful inaugural volleyball tournament at the new indoor sports courts at the Paducah-McCracken County Convention & Expo Center — and a full calendar for the coming months — have local officials and organizers encouraged about the facility's potential.

"It went really well," said Michelle Campbell, convention center executive director, of recently-held tournament which featured mostly middle school participants from McCracken County and throughout the region.

"We actually had a lot of positive feedback. Everybody was thrilled and complimentary, saying how wonderful it was to have this facility."

"All participants and attendees were required to wear masks, and we did a sterilization in between each game and in between sessions," she said.

"We're operating at half capacity. We have eight volleyball courts, we only used four. There were eight teams allowed in the facility at a time."

While admission was charged and there were concessions available, Campbell conceded the real potential of the facility won't be fully realized until more teams and fans can safely attend.

"Right now, it's not a money-making thing. It's more about helping the community and trying to be somewhat of an economic generator," she said.

"It's not what we thought it was going to be (pre-COVID-19), but it will be next year. Right now, we are just being flexible and adjusting.

"With the rules and regulations that we have (to follow), we just have to make sure these kids can play."

The new volleyball and basketball courts were on display last Thursday during



Contributed photo

With COVID-19 restrictions in place, only four of the eight volleyball courts were used in the first tournament held in the new facility.

a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by representatives of local government and interested organizations. The courts are being funded through proceeds from the hotel room tax.

Jim Dudley, chairman of the newly-formed McCracken County Sports Tourism Commission, also was pleased with the success of the inaugural tournament.

"From what I'm hearing and all the pictures on Facebook, everybody seemed to really enjoy it and everything went really well. There was a lot of positive feedback from the community as well," he said.

"I think if we ever get back to what used to be 'normal,' and you could pack the place, you're looking at double the concessions and double the people."

Word of mouth is already generating a lot of interest, even after only one weekend, according to Campbell.

"We're getting a lot of in-state and out-of-state inquiries and we haven't even started pushing it," she said.

"I've heard from two or three different coaches that we have one of the best facilities in the state, and I'm sure that we do, because our Expo Center is one of the best

ones in the state we well.

"This will be a game-changer for Paducah."

Representatives of the local government and community

organizations that came together to make the new downtown Paducah sports facility a reality agree it was a real team effort.

"This is a very exciting time for us, a very exciting time for the convention center and McCracken County," said Dudley, who served as master of ceremonies at the ribbon-cutting and dedication.

The McCracken County Sports Tourism Commission was created by an inter-local agreement between the city of Paducah, McCracken County Fiscal Court and the Paducah Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Through a number of partnerships and cooperation among the various entities, sports tourism, in the form of basketball and volleyball tournaments, will take a giant step forward.

SEE **PLAY/PAGE 8**

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FROM PAGE 7

“We’re also very excited about what this means to McCracken County volleyball and basketball, which both have a long history in our community,” Dudley said.

The courts are being funded through proceeds from the hotel room tax. The estimated cost of the project is just under \$700,000, according to the Sports Tourism Commission chair.

“Our main goal as a commission is what we call ‘heads and beds,’ ” Dudley said. “We want to bring in people from outside the area, get them here for a night or two, and really showcase Paducah.”

Campbell, who oversees the Paducah-McCracken County Convention Center daily operations, agreed.

“Our mission is to be the premier and elite location for high-quality volleyball and basketball tournaments. We want moms and dads from mid-America to pick our location for their family getaway sports vacation,” she said.

Mark Whitlow, convention center board chair, said the investment in the hardwood courts “will attract thousands of visitors to our center and our downtown. They will stay in hotels, dine in our restaurants and shop in our quality stores.

Together, we have greatly improved the quality of life and economic development of the city and county.”

Tim Whitis and Burlin Brower, McCracken County High School volleyball and boys basketball coaches, respectively, noted the impact the expanded facilities will have on their programs.

The facility can be designed to accommodate 16 volleyball courts or four basketball courts. While the flooring can be removed, a cover has been purchased which will allow non-sporting events to be held without taking up the flooring.

Whitis said the new facility will be host to a 32-team tournament he holds which attracts players from five states. It also will allow him to



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McCracken County Judge-Executive Craig Clymer speaks at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the “sports courts” at the Paducah-McCracken County Convention & Expo Center. Clymer praised the public-private partnerships that came together to make the new facility possible.

expand club tournaments and youth volleyball in the community.

“That’s what it’s all about, trying to get kids involved so they can have a great experience.”

Brower said: “As a basketball coach and parent, I’ve had the opportunity to see a lot of facilities. We have one here in Paducah that rivals any place I’ve been. This will also allow some of our basketball players to compete at a high level without having to travel.”

Glen Denton, Paducah Convention and Visitors Bureau chair, likened the collective effort of the entities involved in the project to the players on a basketball court.

“Sometimes only two players may touch the ball, but the others are

just as happy. It’s a team game.”

Paducah Mayor Brandi Harless said the successful effort reminded her of something she heard from the mayor of New Orleans while attending a Delta Regional Authority conference.

The mayor was asked how New Orleans was able to come back from Hurricane Katrina and the answer was, “Take what we already have (and) add to it. This is a perfect example of doing exactly that.”

McCracken County Judge-Executive Craig Clymer called the dedication ceremony “a great day for the county and our entire west Kentucky region. This facility is just tremendous.”

He credited Eddie Jones, a fiscal

court member, with finding a mechanism to help fund the facility without asking the taxpayers to foot the bill.

“Had he not discovered this ability, due to the county’s struggling financial condition, we would not have been able to do this,” Clymer said.

He also praised the public-private partnerships it took to make the sports courts possible, including Jackson Purchase Energy Corp., which donated sports equipment after purchasing the former Paducah Sportsplex for its new headquarters.

“We’re going to see the benefits of this for many years. It’s a real turning point.”