

THE DAILY REPORTER

COLUMBUS' ONLY DAILY BUSINESS AND LEGAL NEWSPAPER - ESTABLISHED 1896

With NHL all-star game and golf's Presidents Cup, 2013 will be banner year for sports in Central Ohio

By RICK ADAMCZAK
Daily Reporter Staff Writer

When last weekend's surprising announcement was made that Columbus would host the National Hockey League all-star game in 2013, it was met with jubilation from civic leaders.

It's a marquee event that will shine the national professional sports media spotlight on the city as bright as it's ever been shined.

In fact, from a professional sports standpoint, next year could very well be the biggest in the city's history with the NHL all-star game in January followed by the prestigious Presidents Cup golf tournament at Dublin's Muirfield Village Golf Club in the fall.

Events such as those certainly give civic leaders reasons to swell with pride, but they're probably even happier because of a more tangible benefit: money.

Those types of events mean lots of cash flowing into the region, spent by visitors, participants and out-of-town media at local hotels, restaurants and other attractions.

For example, when the NHL all-star game, which in fact is four days of activities, was held in Raleigh, N.C. last year it generated an estimated \$11.4 million in direct visitor spending for Raleigh and surrounding Wake County, according to the Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Columbus Blue Jackets President Mike Priest said he estimates that approximately \$12 million will be generated for Columbus from hosting the all-star game, based solely on visitor spending.

Meanwhile the Presidents Cup will have an estimated \$50 million impact to the Columbus region, according to event organizers, as more than 150,000 fans are expected to attend the tournament, which is held every-other-year and typically includes many of the world's best golfers.

As far as landing the NHL all-star game, it's been an event that local tourism officials have eyed since the inception of the Blue Jackets more than a decade ago.

The Blue Jackets and the city of Columbus first officially bid for the game in 2001 with hopes of hosting the game in 2005 or 2006, but were not awarded either game.

"Since then we've always kept our name out there," said Linda Logan, executive director of the Greater Columbus Sports Commission.

Two years ago a bid was submitted to host the game in either 2012, 2013 or 2014.

The 2012 game, which was held Sunday, was awarded to Ottawa.

It wasn't until just three weeks ago that Columbus officials were alerted by the NHL that the league was seriously considering awarding next year's game to Columbus, Logan said.

That meant a frenzied scramble by local organizers to make sure logistics could be finalized to accommodate the game.

"The last three weeks we've been working really hard behind the scenes. We didn't know what the outcome would be. It was a huge puzzle and we had to get a lot of pieces together," said Logan.

The biggest challenge was making sure there would be enough hotel rooms available.

It would not be easy since there already were some

smaller events scheduled that weekend, so some organizations were asked to move their dates.

"The hotel community and convention center stepped up to move groups, who were really agreeable," said Logan. "We had the arena space, we had the convention center space, but we definitely needed the hotels."

She said the all-star game will consume 10,000 room nights at 14 hotels in or near downtown Columbus, including 2,000 rooms on the busiest night.

Once the room availability was finalized, plans to get the game in Columbus progressed — quickly.

By 5 p.m. last Friday hotel contracts with the NHL were finalized and by Saturday morning league officials were comfortable enough with arrangements to announce that the game would indeed be held next year in Columbus.

In an industry where meetings and conventions are often scheduled several years into the future, the awarding of the game 12 months away was lightning fast.

"(Finalizing) it this close to the event was somewhat unusual. Not uncommon, but this close was somewhat unusual," said Logan.

The biggest factor in landing the all-star game, however, isn't even finished yet.

The game would likely have never been awarded to Columbus had it not been for the new 500-room Hilton hotel under construction on High Street across from the Greater Columbus Convention Center and easy walking distance to Nationwide Arena.

The game will be played at the arena and other festivities, including a fan fest, will be held at the convention center, Logan said.

Local tourism officials have long wanted a hotel the size of the new Hilton to attract bigger meetings and conventions and the same philosophy is true in trying to attract bigger and more prestigious sports-related events to the city, said Logan.

"The addition of the new Hilton was significant to our effort to get the all-star game," she said.

Logan said that when the city first applied to host the all-star game it was likely passed over because of the lack of another hotel like the Hilton.

"We probably had enough rooms but we didn't have the right mix. Not enough suites, full-service rooms," she said.

The addition of the Hilton, which is scheduled to open in the fall, will help in trying to attract other big sporting events to the city.

She said the city bid in 2008 to host an NCAA women's basketball Final Four, but was rejected.

Now organizers are more confident in a bid to host the 2017 Final Four because of the presence of the Hilton, Logan said.

The new hotel doesn't just help attract larger events, but also the city can more easily host multiple events at the same time because of the hotel.

"When we hosted the NHL draft (in 2007) our convention center sat wide open because we didn't have (enough) hotel rooms. This enables us to bring in more multiple groups at once," said Logan.