

Group looks to sports tourism

Travelers: Youth, amateur athletics can bring revenue into Thurston County, area bureau says

OLYMPIA – The Olympia, Lacey, Tumwater Visitor and Convention Bureau touted the growing importance of youth and amateur sports tourism at its annual meeting Thursday.

Helping to sell that message to about 140 people at the Indian Summer Golf & Country Club was former Seattle Mariner Jay Buhner, the keynote speaker for the 90-minute meeting.

Although Buhner spent most of the meeting answering questions about his days as an outfielder for the Mariners, he also shared his experiences as a parent traveling with his son and daughter to their youth baseball and softball games.

“Dad is paying for a lot of flight bills, hotel bills and rental car bills, but that’s what it is all about and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Buhner told the audience.

It is that kind of spending that could help offset what is expected to be a soft year for business and leisure travel, VCB Executive Director Mike Dexter said.

He emphasized that Thursday’s meeting was meant to raise the visibility of sports tourism and what it could do for a community.

“It is a growing segment of the tourism market,” he said, adding that youth and amateur sports nationally generates about \$6 billion.

Some in the audience, however, such as Dee Ragsdale of Tumwater, said more needs to be done to increase the number of playing fields in Olympia and Tumwater that children can access for soccer, football and baseball.

Ragsdale is part of Blackhills Community Soccer Complex, a nonprofit effort to bring more soccer fields to Tumwater. To date the organization has raised about \$1.4 million to go toward 10 new soccer fields, said Ragsdale, treasurer and a longtime board member for the nonprofit.

Land for the 40-acre complex, located on 93rd Avenue Southwest, was purchased in 2003 and the fields were recently seeded with grass, she said.

Up next are infrastructure investments, Ragsdale said.

Once complete and hosting youth soccer tournaments, the complex likely will generate the same kind of revenue created by an existing South Sound soccer tournament known as Kick in the Grass, she said. Ragsdale estimated Kick in the Grass generates about \$1 million to \$1.2 million in tourism spending over one weekend.

Dexter also said during the meeting that lodging tax revenue in Thurston County rose 8 percent in 2008 from 2007. Although the South Sound economy slowed last year, the addition of Great Wolf Lodge in Grand Mound and the outdoors store Cabela’s in Lacey helped to boost tourism, Dexter said.

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