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McKechnie Field ready for \$9 million renovation

Advisory panel approves funding deal for 88-year-old stadium

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BRADENTON -- McKechnie Field would receive more than \$9 million of improvements by spring 2013 -- including 30 percent more seats and a fan boardwalk -- under a tentative deal involving the city of Bradenton, Manatee County and the Pittsburgh Pirates.

The improvements would equip the 88-year-old field with modern-day fan-focused amenities like a modern scoreboard and sound system and a tiki bar. They would also make the stadium more suitable for live music concerts and other non-baseball events such as nonprofit fundraisers.

About \$1 million in outstanding debt on the park would be paid off immediately by the city rather than in installments. The county's tourist development tax fund would contribute \$400,000 every year for 20 years instead of an ever-changing 10.5 percent of annual tourist tax revenue.

And the Pittsburgh Pirates organization that uses McKechnie Field for spring training and the minor league Marauders would more than double the amount of media exposure it donates to Manatee County, from \$150,000 to \$400,000 annually.

The county's Tourist Development Council unanimously approved a recommendation in favor of the deal at its Monday meeting. The arrangement needs the approval of the Bradenton City Council and Manatee County commissioners to become reality; both are expected to vote on the idea within the next two weeks.

"This is absolutely the collaboration we were looking for," said Vernon DeSears, tourist development member, "with all of us working together to make this region a destination."

David Teitelbaum, another tourist development member, described the proposed deal as "creative," "fabulous," and a "win-win opportunity for the county and the Pirates."

The city, which owns McKechnie Field, had tried about two years ago to fund needed renovations through a federal grant. But the grant never came through, and plans for McKechnie's renovation have laid dormant ever since.

Bradenton City Clerk Carl Callahan described Monday's tentative deal as a "long-term partnership" that had been in negotiations ever since the federal grant funding fell through.

"Our question has always been, how can we do this with the least expense to the taxpayers?" he said. "If we were going to have to come 'out of pocket' for the cost, we'd be paying \$600,000 or so in debt service, and we could not do that."

Trevor Gooby, the Pirates' director of Florida operations, said the expanded seating is one of the most pivotal improvements that would come out of the deal. McKechnie now seats 6,500 people and has no seating around the outfield. The improvements would add another 2,000 seats, including around the outfield.

Gooby is also excited about the tiki bar, boardwalk area, improved sound system and scoreboard.

"The stadium was built originally just for spring training, and we've added a minor league team, so there are a lot of newer things missing that other stadiums around here, including in Clearwater and Port Charlotte, have," he said. "These improvements will add to people's overall experience at the park."

The chance to increase marketing of Manatee County to the Pittsburgh area is what most excites Elliott Falcione, executive director of the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Already well-publicized with high-profile signs at Pittsburgh Stadium, the Manatee area will likely receive even more signage as well as more exposure through radio and television because of the increased media trade.

"This gives us the ability to market our area to an area we believe could be a top feeder market for us," Falcione said.

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