

Spring training just part of county sports tourism picture

Hector Flores

This past Saturday, the Tampa Bay Rays played their first home spring training game at Charlotte Sports Park, and the estimated attendance was 5,354.

We welcome the impact from the fans attending the games and supporting local hospitality businesses such as hotels, restaurants and attractions. They also contribute significantly to our local tourism and sales tax collections. In the recent past, these funds have been spent on a variety of quality-of-life projects such as recreation centers as well as various infrastructure and public safety initiatives.

While the Charlotte Sports Park hosts the Rays, other ballfields in the county will be used by participants in the Snowbird Baseball Classic. More than a dozen Division I and II teams will compete at Centennial Park, South County Regional Park and Harold Avenue Regional Park.

The county has been attracting a growing number of college swim teams to hold their version of spring training at Centennial Park pool. County venues are used for softball, basketball and pickleball tournaments, gymnastics meets, BMX and powerboat races. In fiscal year 2024-2025, the county hosted more than 64 sporting events, which generated more than \$40 million in economic impact.

The county has been investing in sports tourism for decades. We have a dedicated sales and sports marketing manager who networks with event organizers to provide information about our venues, lodging, restaurants and off-the-field tourism opportunities.

In January, officials from the U.S. Sports Congress conducted a site visit of our destination in preparation for hosting their annual conference here in December 2026. As a result, conference attendees will experience not only Sunseeker Resort, but also partner properties including Four Points by Sheraton, TT's Tiki Bar, The Wyvern, and Fishermen's Village. In addition, attendees will participate in organized afternoon excursions featuring local attractions such as the Visual Arts Center, Aileron Golf Club and SUP Englewood.

Sporting events aren't just great opportunities to watch competitions, the revenues generated by attending visitors saves taxpayers nearly \$1,000 annual in property taxes. So get out and enjoy a game and welcome our guests enjoying our world-class destination.

Hurricane update

The County Commission on Wednesday received an update on the fiscal impact of hurricanes Irma, Ian, Idalia, Debbie, Helene and Milton to county facilities. The total projected cost of recovery and repairs from the storms was nearly \$354 million. The county projects Federal Emergency Management Agency grants will cover more than \$222 million. Insurance and other

agency grants will account for more than \$94 million and the county share will be about \$35.5 million. The most damaging storms were Ian and Milton which the county projects cost \$321 million and \$94 million, respectively.

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