

Spring Training Guest Opinion
By Commissioner Ray Judah

As Lee County enjoys a phenomenal Spring Training season, it is important to pause and recognize the value of Major League Baseball in our community. We are extremely fortunate to host the Minnesota Twins and Boston Red Sox and how they have enhanced our area as the destination of choice for our wonderful visitors from the Midwest and Northeast. Indeed, during one of the worst economic recessions in recorded history, Spring Training baseball provides positive revenue flow to our local economy and supports thousands of jobs in our local hotels, motels, restaurants and retail stores.

In fact, an economic study by the Florida Sports Foundation in 2000 indicated that each Major League Baseball team generates \$25 million to the local community. An independent study by Sarasota County in 2008 revealed that the Boston Red Sox with their "Red Sox Nation" fan base would produce a \$45 million impact.

The presence of Major League Baseball offers a multiplier effect further benefiting Lee County. Both the Boston Red Sox and the Minnesota Twins contribute substantially and participate in local fund raising events and community programs and activities. Both teams have raised millions of dollars and provide resources for the pediatric cancer care center at the Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida, Boys and Girls Club and Little League Baseball in addition to numerous other community service organizations.

Our baseball friendly environment has attracted the interest and attention of amateur baseball organizations such as Roy Hobbs, Gene Cusic Classic, the Perfect Game and women's collegiate softball tournaments. In four weeks, the Ray Hobbs tournament generates approximately \$10 million dollars to our local economy.

In the summer of 2008, the Boston Red Sox indicated a strong desire to leave the City of Palms Park and pursue various options for a new Spring Training site. The Lee County Board of Commissioners acted decisively to ensure that the Boston Red Sox remained in Lee County by entering into a 30-year contract.

Unlike the previous contract the new contract expressly prohibits an opt out clause, broadens the use of the new facility for non-baseball year round events, increases the annual lease from \$300,000 to \$500,000 and requires the Boston Red Sox to increase their proportional share of the stadium refurbishment fund from \$20,000 annually to an average of \$100,000 per year.

In preparation for the new stadium, the Lee County Board of Commissioners recently approved the Construction Management and Design teams including local contractors and architectural firm. Design and construction of the stadium will provide thousands of jobs for our local work force.

June 1st is the deadline for site selection and four property owners are currently competing to provide the most favorable proposal to the Board of County Commissioners.

As with the Lee County Sports Complex, the Lee County Commission will be using tourist bed tax revenue to cover cost of construction of the new Spring Training facility for the Boston Red Sox.

Over the years, The Board of County Commissioners has exercised prudent budget management practices through selective operation and capital improvement decisions. Unlike so many local and state governments that are struggling with excessive debt, Lee County's fiscal position is stable with strong reserves. In lieu of going out to the bond market and paying a high rate of interest, Lee County is investigating the option of borrowing internally from budget reserves to reduce financing costs. Currently, budget reserves invested in treasury certificates receive nominal interest and repaying internal loans through the use of tourist tax to cover borrowing costs would offer a higher interest rate and greater rate of return to the tax payer.

America's favorite past time will continue to be a home run for Lee County.