

River Cats adding new concert site

Outdoor venue could be rearranged to host sports, graduations.

By Jon Ortiz - Bee Staff Writer

Published 5:06 am PDT Monday, September 10, 2007

It's little more than grass and picnic tables now, but the Sacramento River Cats want to transform a 1.5-acre plot next to Raley Field in West Sacramento into a state-of-the-art outdoor event hot spot unlike any other in the region.

The Triple A baseball team will announce today its plan to privately finance a facility flexible enough to host everything from concerts and theater productions to volleyball games and high school graduations.

Alan Ledford, president of Raley Field, said the plan is in its earliest stages and he wouldn't comment on construction costs or naming rights. The facility should be completed by March 2009.

"This will be a great fit for the community," Ledford said. "We're excited."

The announcement reflects how the River Cats, now in their eighth season in West Sacramento, continue to evolve from a Triple A baseball franchise into a regional entertainment player. It also meshes with West Sacramento's plans to revitalize its riverfront as a work/play destination.

"These kinds of venues are terrific for adding to the general appeal of our waterfront," said city redevelopment manager Val Toppenberg.

Mayor Christopher Cabaldon called the proposal "a venue that will increase community pride" and boost the local economy.

While some larger venues in the region have struggled to book acts and boost ticket sales, Raley Field keeps adding events to its non-baseball calendar.

Big-name performers such as John Mayer and the Dave Matthews Band have performed there, and the stadium often hosts community celebrations, festivals and private events. Some smaller events will likely move to the new facility, Ledford said. The organization will continue booking bigger events for the stadium.

The proposed site lies between the stadium's grassy Home Run Hill in right field, and Third Street, one-tenth of a mile from the Sacramento River and the Tower Bridge. The team already uses the area for barbecues, wine tastings and smaller concerts.

Pent-up demand for small outdoor venues is so intense that River Cats executives estimate that once the 3,500-seat project is done they'll add at least 60 dates to the 100 events already hosted there each year.

Designed by Heller Manus Architects of San Francisco, the facility will include a permanent 40-foot by 60-foot canopy-covered stage on the north end with lighting and a sound system.

An area in front of the stage will accommodate table seating for 1,300 people, or 2,800 seats configured in rows. Behind that, box seats and four suites will back up to a gently sloped elevated grass section where visitors can spread blankets.

Gates on the south end of the venue will open into a plaza with concessions and restrooms.

Local event promoters and entertainment industry experts said the River Cats' decision to build a smaller facility makes good business sense.

Larger venues like Arco Arena and the Sleep Train Amphitheatre near Marysville are becoming more difficult to book with surefire sellout acts. And the new facility will take advantage of the amenities that Raley Field already has.

"It will be a lovely addition for the area, especially with the industry trending toward smaller venues," said Sherry Wasserman, president of Berkeley-based events promoter Another Planet Entertainment. "There just aren't many artists who draw 15,000 people anymore."

During the emergence of arena concerts in the 1960s and '70s, music fans in the Sacramento region often had to travel to the Bay Area to catch the biggest performers. That changed in the mid-1980s when Arco Arena opened and Cal Expo built a 14,500-seat venue. That facility closed in 1996.

No one keeps track of how much money the region takes in from live performances, said a spokeswoman for the Sacramento Convention and Visitors Bureau, though it is clear the industry is downshifting to smaller facilities. But Sacramento currently has little to offer by way of the 1,500- to 5,000-seat venues many promoters and artists prefer.

Convention Center manager Judy Goldbar said the 2,450-seat Sacramento Community Center and the 81-year-old Memorial Auditorium, which can handle 4,000 visitors, together sell about 375,000 tickets each year. Average profits from rent and concession sales range from \$9,000 to \$12,000 per night.

The theater-in-the-round Wells Fargo Pavilion on H Street can seat 2,200, but its operations are restricted to its theater season between Memorial Day and Labor Day and a few small private events, said a spokesman.

"A lot of artists who go through on their way to Bay Area wineries would stop to play a small outdoor place (in Sacramento)," said Gary Bongiovanni, editor of Pollstar, a Fresno-based concert industry publication. "Your weather is generally good enough to have a fairly extended season. You'll definitely see more shows if they build this."

Lee Smith, chairman of Live Nation Inc., a Beverly Hills-based promoter and stadium owner-operator, said the new facility at Raley Field will capitalize on the "niche venues" trend that has made wineries more popular with performers and audiences.

"And it's a well-known site, it's accessible, it has a good track record and obviously there's already plenty of parking and infrastructure in place," said Smith, whose company this year put the Sleep Train Amphitheatre in Marysville on the market.