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Ford Field rises to elite venue status

Jaclyn Trop / The Detroit News

Detroit -- Ford Field will be the epicenter of the sports world this weekend as host of the NCAA Final Four, just one of a steady stream of 200 events, large and small, including private parties and corporate events, held at the stadium this year.

The state's lingering recession has led to a slight dip in demand for corporate banquets, weddings and bar mitzvahs, but the arena expects to recoup lost business with blockbuster events like the men's collegiate championships, as well as June's National Summit and an annual sold-out Kenny Chesney concert in August, said Joel Scott, Ford Field's director of promotions and event marketing.

"Due to the recent economy, we've seen a slight drop off" in bookings for private and corporate events at the 1.85 million-square-foot stadium, Scott said. "Through the larger events, we're certainly hoping" to bolster revenue, he added.

Ford Field, home of the Detroit Lions since it opened in 2002, has met expectations as a "state-of-the-art" facility, industry experts said. Controlled by quasi-government group, the Detroit-Wayne County Stadium Authority, the arena has hosted more major events with each year, including the 2006 Super Bowl and Wrestlemania in 2007.

Ford Field's location within downtown Detroit's sports entertainment complex, near Comerica Park, Fox Theatre and several sports bars and restaurants, has boosted the stadium's profile over and above the Lions' old home, the Pontiac Silverdome, said Scott Watkins, senior consultant with the Anderson Economic Group in East Lansing.

A record of success hosting sports, concerts and conferences shows that Ford Field has versatility necessary to attract business, he said. "It opens a range of economic opportunities," he said.

The stadium's size, attractive design and downtown location outshine many other venues around the country, according to Watkins. Ford Field's distinction of hosting the Super Bowl and the Final Four within four years is "second to none for a stadium."

30-40 big events each year

The arena hosts between 30 and 40 large events each year, including 10 Lions games, said

Kelly Urquhart, vice president of events at Ford Field. A Monster Truck Jam in January attracted 52,000 fans.

The stadium, which cost about \$500 million to build, has four levels of suites, a level of club seating and a level for restaurants, concession stands and retail.

A 200-room hotel included in the original footprint has not been constructed, and the arena is accepting proposals for alternate uses, Scott said. Commercial office space is also available to lease.

Chicago-based Levy Restaurant Group, which operates seven restaurants and about 100 carts and concession stands in addition to serving as Ford Field's in-house caterer, saw a decrease in holiday parties and corporate events last year, said spokesman Tom Wagner. But the company's catering arm continues to host breakfast meetings for small groups as well as black-tie dinners for more than 1,000 guests.

Next up: Economic summit

Ford's next big event is the Detroit Economic Club-sponsored National Summit, expected to draw 5,000 participants, as well as 200 of the country's most influential leaders in business, government and academia to discuss pressing issues.

Country singer Kenny Chesney's all-day festival and concert has drawn about 46,000 fans each summer for the past three years and is expected to do the same in August.

Ford Field's next major sporting event will be the Frozen Four men's college hockey tournament in April 2010.

By hosting a diversity of events, Ford Field will garner a reputation beyond sports circles as a world-class facility, Scott said.

"Larger events actually help promote the smaller ones," he said.

72,000 guests for weekend

The stadium will seat 72,000 spectators this weekend for the sold-out basketball tournament.

Last year's Final Four tournament at San Antonio's Alamodome held 43,000, said Dave Beachnau, executive director of the Detroit Metro Sports Commission.

In addition to seating capacity, Ford Field is accessible and boasts good seating flow and sightlines, said Bill Ryan, executive director of the Detroit Local Organizing Committee.

"I think people will be stunned by how beautiful it is," Ryan said.

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