

News

A New, Empty Stadium

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The University of Akron opened its \$61.6 million on-campus football stadium last year, replacing a decrepit venue, far from campus, that was built in 1940 with help from the Depression-era Civil Works Administration. And though most at Akron have welcomed the new facility, saying it has helped the university further shed its “commuter school” reputation and develop more of a campus culture, there is one problem: the matter of paying for it.

The Zips, as Akron’s athletic teams are nicknamed, finished with a 1-11 record in football this year. Last year, during the new stadium’s inaugural season, the team finished with a slightly better 3-9 record. And though the novelty of having a new stadium spurred ticket sales last year, this year Akron’s athletics department did not generate the ticket revenue it expected to help pay down the university’s debt for the stadium’s construction.

The stadium seats 30,000 fans. This season, however, an average of 10,184 fans went to the six home games. The largest crowd was the opener against Syracuse University, with 15,965 fans, and the smallest crowd was last week’s closer against the University at Buffalo, with only 5,216 fans. This year’s average attendance is significantly down from last year’s 17,382. Last year’s average attendance beat the average for the 15,317 Mid-American Conference, of which Akron is a member.

Akron’s annual debt payment for the bonds that financed [InfoCision Stadium-Summa Field](#) is \$4.3 million, according to Brian Davis, the university’s interim assistant vice president for finance and administration. He noted that the athletics department is responsible for \$2.2 million of this payment. Davis said the department expected half of this to come from ticket sales, but that the actual ticket sale revenue this season is projected to be about \$400,000 short.

To resolve this shortfall, Davis said, the athletics department will be forced to internally reallocate funds within its \$24.4 million budget. Though the shortfall is relatively small and funds will not have to be taken from outside of the athletics budget to resolve it, Davis admitted that “you never want to come up short.” Moreover, 71 percent of the department’s budget is funded by a general service fee assessed to all students.

Davis noted, however, that the institution went into the construction of the new stadium expecting that the athletics department might not be able to meet its portion of the debt payment through ticket sales alone, at least for the first few years.

“We went into this with ‘eyes wide open,’” Davis wrote in an e-mail. “An on-campus stadium adds an intrinsic value to the college experience. This fact, in addition to engineering analyses and estimates indicating the costs to repair the aging existing stadium [the [Rubber Bowl](#)] approached the cost of construction a new on-campus stadium, support the cost efficiency of the decision to build new.”

Gregg Bach, athletics department spokesman, said that his department’s estimates for ticket sales this year were “conservative” in nature. It was difficult, he said, to set benchmarks from only one prior year of history in a new stadium.



Photo: University of Akron
InfoCision Stadium-Summa Field on opening day 2009.



"We had a first-year coach, and we also weren't as competitive on the field as we'd hoped for," Bach said. "That resulted in lower ticket sales and lower ticket revenue. That's disappointing to all of us. But, when we look two, three and four years down the road to where we think the program will go, we think we'll make our revenue goals and hopefully set off some of the losses we're seeing now."



Photo: University of Akron
The Rubber Bowl nearing completion in 1940.

Bach said that the athletics department "was not scrambling" to find ways to resolve the shortfall, adding that he and his colleagues are mulling a number of options right now -- long before the budget year is slated to end -- to trim enough to meet it. He also said the department is already thinking about how much revenue it should expect from football ticket sales next year.

Because of the relatively small size of the shortfall and the fact that that athletics department will not have to seek funds from outside its budget to meet it, athletics watchdogs amid the faculty ranks are reserved.

J. Dean Carro, the program's faculty athletics representative since 2002 and professor at Akron's School of Law, said there was no question in his mind that the university needed to either spend a significant chunk of money to rehab the old stadium or build a new one. In fact, he recalled that many seasons ago, one portion of the Rubber Bowl had to be closed to fans because there were concerns about its support system.

"I was cautious," Carro said of his initial support for the new stadium. "We all recognized there was going to be a lot of debt, but we thought we'd be able to carry it.... Still, we can't give the stadium back now. The stadium is here, and we're going to use it."

The new stadium does have a number of intangible benefits, Carro said, noting that it has brought many long-lost alumni back to the institution and given it a residential campus feel. He also said that the city and neighboring community will be able to make use of the facility.

"If I knew what I knew today [about the ticket sale shortfall], would I still support the new stadium?" Carro said. "I'm not sure. Still, I think most people realize that we had to make a bold move as an institution. Honestly, time will tell whether it was a good move or a bad move."

— **David Moltz**