

WHITE PAPER

Precedents and Tradeoffs for Siting of Tournament Ballfields

Michael W. Mehaffy, Ph.D.¹

Sam Nielson, P.E.²

The great urbanist Jane Jacobs observed that concentrating too much of one use can be dangerous for city vitality. If that single use is highly active at some times and then inactive at others, that can result in a “feast or famine” condition – congestion problems at one extreme, and empty, inefficient, and potentially dangerous conditions at the other. A more optimum pattern is the “18-hour city” where multiple uses overlap, keeping facilities in more regular and more cost-effective use. These opportunities for multiple use also often translate into more equitable distribution around the city, rather than concentrating in a single area that is harder to access for some.

Jacobs also pointed out that the disruption of an urban fabric from large single uses tends to produce what she called a “border vacuum” – a kind of dead zone at the edges of that use. The negative effect of these border vacuums is felt well beyond their edges and into the surrounding neighborhoods. It is true that the immediate use does often benefit from economies of scale and concentration – but the surrounding community pays a price, in effect constituting a subsidy for the single use. A healthier and more prosperous city in the long run, Jacobs said, has more uses distributed more widely, and at a finer grain.

With these concerns in mind, we looked into the siting of tournament ballfields in relation to the proposed Flatwater Mews development to the southwest of Oak Lake Park in Lincoln NE. We examined several precedent case studies of cities that had successful tournament baseball field locations, and we sought to draw urban planning lessons to apply to Lincoln, and to the Flatwater Mews area specifically.

We found that, while the older models emphasize clustering many single-use, tournament-scale ballfields, newer models distribute the ballfields over a larger area, allowing multi-purpose use, greater local benefit, greater urban equity, and greater return on public investment.

Background: Tournament Format and Desirable Amenities

First, in order to understand the issues for tournament ballfield siting, it is necessary to understand the structure of tournaments. There are two main divisions of tournament types, college-level and pre-college level, with the latter generally in the format of “Little League” baseball and softball.

¹ Structura Naturalis Inc., Sustasis Foundation, White Salmon, WA

² Parametrix Inc., Portland, OR

There are five major divisions of Little League³, each of which has different age groups:

<u>Division</u>	<u>Age of Players</u>	<u>Tournaments/Series</u>
Lincoln Youth Baseball/		
Little League Baseball	6–12 years old	Little League World Series
Babe Ruth/Cal Ripken	13-15 years old	Intermediate League World Series
AAU/Legion	15-18 years old	Junior League World Series
College Baseball	18+ years old	Senior League World Series

Factors to consider:

~9% of kids age 13-18 play baseball. Placing an emphasis on exclusive use of fields for organized sports for kids 13+ only benefits a small portion of the community on an even smaller portion of the usable time. Most regional sports facilities are locked off to the general public and/or are not accessible to most kids as it is a concentrated single use rather than a distributed use for all like would be found in a neighborhood park system.

The benefits of co-location of ballfields within neighborhood parks would be enormous for equity and inclusion. Neighborhood parks are available to everyone, while regional sports facilities are only available to select few.

- **82.9% of kids are active outside if they have access to safe outside activities.** This just accounts for any activity and not the fully recommended 60 minutes per day which only 5% of the country meets. This is heavily influenced by household income and equity concerns as 33.4% of kids from a household incomes under \$25k get no outside activity compared to only 9.9% of kids from a household incomes >\$100k.
- **Only 27.5 percent of children from homes with incomes under \$25,000 a year play sports.** This is true of any organized sport, not just baseball. This compares to the 45.5 percent of kids from homes with incomes greater than \$100,000 a year. Clearly, there is a need to address the urban inequity in availability and use of sports facilities.

Tournaments (both pre-college and college level) do bring significant income to communities, but can also bring penalties. To mitigate those negative factors, planners can consider the following recommendations:

- **Field distribution.** Tournaments require both fenced game fields as well as other less restrictive practice fields. Many city and town tournament hosts will use only a few fields for the actual tournament (ones with fences and the most seating but can still be in neighborhood parks) but then will spread the practice fields through the neighborhood parks. This is easily handled as each bracket or pool of play will play all games at the same field enabling families to stay throughout town but still close to their play and practice field.
- **Enough lodging within a short drive to each field.** Most tournaments bring regional or state participants travelling by car. It is much easier to attract hotels that benefit from a diverse user rather than a once a year tournament.

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_League_Baseball#Summary_chart_of_major_divisions_in_Little_League_Baseball

- ***Proximity to restaurants and other amenities including other things to do.*** This one is the one most lacking for regional sports facilities. Most tournaments only play 1-2 games per day, and at other times the teams and families are looking for something else to do to fill up the time – often with shopping and recreation. This leisure time offers an opportunity for the tournament host city to earn significant income from the events.
- ***Malls are an increasingly unsatisfactory choice.*** Many complexes have tied themselves closely to malls to provide shopping opportunities, but as malls are struggling to remain open, these complexes can become less desirable. The distribution of playing fields over a larger urban area, offering neighborhood shopping, restaurants, museums and other amenities, is a preferred option for most families, and a way of directing income to local businesses and institutions.
- ***Families come with players.*** It is important to note that the largest source of revenue for tournaments is the families (often many siblings) who come with the players, making a family vacation. Typically they do not want to simply revolve their whole stay around the baseball or softball games, but also want to see the city and its attractions.
- ***Distributed locations make it easier to recruit local volunteers as umpires and as organization staff.*** Volunteers who can walk or bike to the event location are likely to be less expensive than recruiting volunteers (or hired staff) to travel. Many urban leagues have volunteers who can literally see the ballpark lights from their home, and can take responsibility for checking on field conditions, shutting down lights, managing concessions, etc.

Case Study Examples

1. Portland, Oregon: Little League baseball and softball tournaments⁴

This area hosts many little league tournaments (ages 6-12) as well as many softball tournaments (6-18) every year, utilizing only neighborhood ball parks. The city invested in two fields (Erv Lind in Normandale Community Park and Riverside Park) to act as tournament fields. It relies on many other neighborhood parks and schools to act as designated practice fields. All fields are in a walkable and bikeable neighborhood, which is a huge draw. One modest neighborhood field in a smaller footprint is enough to host many tournaments if also utilizing neighborhood parks (not fenced and open to the public year round) as overflow for practice. The local little league president has stated that the biggest reason they are selected every year for tournaments is because of the city's ability to accommodate travelers (hotels, restaurants, shopping, recreational activities including many parks including downtown forest park).⁵

2. Lewiston, Idaho: Small-scale college baseball in a small town (NAIA World Series)⁶

⁴ <https://katu.com/news/local/little-league-international-to-expand-baseball-softball-world-series-tournaments-in-2021>

⁵ Discussion with Sam Nielson in 2019.

⁶ https://lmtribune.com/sports/world-series-to-stay-in-lewiston-through-2025/article_953e69f2-6f1a-5e86-9a24-12b7b740542b.html

This tournament is held in a small town, and follows the same format of relying on a main college field and then utilizing other local and high school parks and fields. The city actually puts money into these high school and neighborhood parks as a result. The main reason for this selection city is that the field is close to downtown, recreation, and enough facilities to host. There is no other regional sports facility.

3. Omaha, Nebraska: Larger-scale baseball tournament (College World Series)⁷

This is the biggest baseball tournament around. This tournament follows the same formula as the tournament in Lewiston (large college facility and distributed practice fields) but on an even larger scale. The proximity to downtown neighborhoods and the support from the city is the main reason the tournament continues to remain here. Once again, however, not all facilities are concentrated in one location, and practice fields are available as multi-use facilities by local residents across the city.

Conclusion

The University of Nebraska already has amazing facilities in the vicinity of Oak Lake (Bowlin Stadium for softball, and Haymarket Park for baseball and softball) that can be used for hosting tournaments. Investments in neighborhood parks and school fields can manage overflow, and bring many benefits to the neighborhoods, the children and the city. These neighborhood and school parks can be used 95% of the time by the local communities, except for the infrequent periods when the tournaments need to reserve these spaces.

The Oak Lake vicinity could accommodate a small number of additional ballparks, but ideally they will be multi-purpose spaces that are available to local residents as well as tournament participants. This will clearly bring greater benefits to the local residents and to the city, at a reduced investment and operating cost.

⁷ https://www.espn.com/college-sports/baseball/story/_/id/29288511/why-cancellation-college-world-series-omaha-leaves-gaping-hole-everyone-involved