



gwinnettdaily.com

Friday, October 05, 2007

Officials see athletic future in Texas town

By Camie Young
Senior Writer

Friday, October 05, 2007



Staff Photo: Camie Young
From left, Philip Wolfe, director of Gwinnett Medical Center, Jim Maran, director of the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce and Jim Steele, chief operations officer of Gwinnett County Public Schools, tour Dr. Pepper Ballpark in Frisco, Texas, on Thursday.

Highlights of the first day of the tour included tours of Frisco's art and athletics centers.

FRISCO, Texas - With interest in bringing minor league baseball and now Major League Soccer to Gwinnett, officials spent Thursday learning how one Texas community turned athletics into a tourism and economic development boon.

With \$171 million in public investment matched by \$113 million in private funds over the past 10 years, Frisco, Texas, boasts a minor league baseball stadium, a hockey arena, a cycling velodrome and a premiere soccer stadium with a 17-field complex.

Officials said Thursday the baseball and hockey project, which also includes a convention center and hotel, has invigorated \$800 billion into the tax base.

"What they've done here is exactly what we need to do with Gwinnett Place," said Joe Allen, the director of the Duluth area community improvement district, who was one of about 50 officials to visit Texas this week.

Government, business and education leaders touched down Thursday in the Dallas suburb, which has a similar population, demographic and growth struggle as Gwinnett.

"It would be a great reinvestment and redevelopment opportunity," Allen said of the ballpark possibility, which the county began studying this year.

Tom Martin, president of the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce board, said one board member recently introduced the idea of a Major League Soccer franchise, although few details are available about the early stages of that pursuit.

Chairman Charles Bannister was astounded by the amount of money the city put into its arts and athletic ventures, much of which has come from a tax increment financing strategy, similar to the tax allocation district idea defeated by voters in Gwinnett last year.

"I think we got a good picture of what possibilities are out there, if you can get people together to do it," he said. "There's another piece to the puzzle. They've got a lot of free money."

While the baseball possibility is still under consideration, officials said they were excited to see what it could mean for the county.

"You got to see how it fits into the community and to get the feel of it," Commissioner Lorraine Green said. "It's very interesting. It would definitely put us in another league."