

Arizona may land winter baseball in Southwest Valley

As MLB ends deal with Hawaii league, some Valley stadiums see a new opportunity

by **Elias C. Arnold** - Jan. 12, 2009 12:00 AM
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Another professional development league could land in the Valley, a move that would solidify Major League Baseball's foothold in Arizona.

MLB ended a three-year contract with the Hawaii Winter Baseball league in December.

That creates an opportunity for the Arizona ballparks that don't host Arizona Fall League games.

"Year by year, by year, there's been things that have happened that have added to baseball's presence here in the Valley, so it would seem to be a logical move," Cactus League President Robert Brinton said.

The Cactus League pumped more than \$310 million into the Arizona economy in 2007, according to the Arizona Office of Tourism.

This spring, the league opens with 14 teams - up from a low of seven - with a 15th starting in 2010. There's an MLB office in Phoenix and the six-team Arizona Fall League recently completed its 18th season.

A baseball team with training operations in Arizona spends up to \$2 million a year on players' lodging and other expenses, Brinton said.

A new baseball program wouldn't generate tourism spending similar to that of the Cactus League, but the West Valley's new baseball stadiums that are seeking year-round revenue sources would still benefit.

The Hawaii Winter Baseball league typically featured low-level minor-league players, whereas the Arizona Fall League tends to have upper-level minor-leaguers.

"We think this might be a good fit for us," Goodyear Ballpark Manager Nathan Torres said.

Torres wants the southwest Valley's 10,000-seat stadium on MLB's radar in case of a move.

The ballpark, under construction south of Interstate 10 off Estrella Parkway, will host the Cleveland Indians' spring-training games in February.

The Cincinnati Reds will join them in 2010.

The prospect of a winter league also piqued the interest of John Kaites, a Chicago White Sox representative.

"Because if there is an opportunity, we would like to have them at our facility," he said.

The Sox and Los Angeles Dodgers will run Camelback Ranch-Glendale, the new spring-training facility that Glendale is building at 111th Avenue and Camelback Road. The first game is in March.

According to a Hawaii Winter Baseball statement, MLB general managers voted at their winter meetings to consolidate operations in Arizona "for logistical reasons."

Joe Garagiola Jr., MLB's senior vice president for baseball operations, told mlb.com that "there are some alternatives under discussion, including something in Arizona, but at this point I don't know if anything is 'final-final.' "

MLB spokesman Pat Courtney said some of the league's budgets had been frozen, forcing it to reassess "all new initiatives."

Courtney said the league could extend its Hawaii contract or move. Besides Arizona, he knew of no other states in the running.

If a move happens, the fall- and winter-league seasons would overlap, he said, as one starts in September and another ends in November.

Regarding fan appeal, Brinton said Arizona Fall League "hasn't developed the fan base, but it's still great baseball."