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## In Legislature, early funding for local sports groups

State budget plans set aside millions

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Nathan Benderson Park isn't the only sports-related hometown item that can be found in the Florida Legislature's early budget drafts this year.

The Modern Pentathlon event held in Sarasota since 2014 and scheduled to return this May, as well as the Bradenton Tournament Sports Park, are slated to receive funds in the preliminary spending plans of the Florida House and Senate as well.



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Students from the Robert L. Taylor center row at Nathan Benderson Park in August.

The \$2 million the Senate has currently allotted for the Nathan Benderson Park venue is a far cry from the \$11 million the park's fundraising arm requested from the Legislature this year, but inclusion is a good sign that some money may be allocated.

"I played the budget game for years," said former state Sen. Michael Bennett, a member of the park's fundraising arm who requested the budget item and found a sponsor in Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota. "The fact that we are in there early bodes well for us. I think we are going to come away with something, but who knows."

That doesn't mean that money can't be added or dropped before the session's end next month. Gov. Rick Scott vetoed \$5 million set aside for the park in 2011. And though the Sarasota County-owned park was absent from early budgets in both 2012 and 2013, the Legislature eventually awarded Nathan Benderson Park a total of \$10 million.

Other Sarasota and Manatee county sports events could benefit from state funding this year. The Senate has set aside \$250,000 for the World Cup Final in modern pentathlon hosted by former Secretary of State Katherine Harris and a local organizing committee. And the city-owned tournament sports park in Bradenton's Pirate City appears in both the House and Senate budgets. The Senate has set aside \$1 million while the House has allotted \$125,000 for improvements at the facility.

Touting economic impact has become the prime way that officials hoping to secure funds for tourism and sports-related projects convince lawmakers to invest in their events or venues. Visitor spending — the hotel stays and local patronage a venue can generate — has inspired lawmakers to give to other sports organizations, such as the training school IMG Academy, in the past.

In that area, Nathan Benderson Park, operated by the Suncoast Aquatic Center Nature Associates nonprofit, has had significant success. Thirty teams, from the U.S. national team to collegiate groups such as Harvard, traveled to train at the venue in 2015. According to a Visit Sarasota County report, events at the park generated more than \$25 million in economic impact. The Florida Sports Commission named it

venue of the year in 2015 and USRowing opted to move its Olympic Trials to Sarasota this spring.

But its evolution hasn't come without criticism. In 2014, park leaders briefly lost their nonprofit status after missing a deadline to file paperwork, and park president Paul Blacketter was investigated last fall after a video of a personal spat with a former Benderson Development employee was posted to YouTube. Despite requests, the park has not received state funds in two years, and some lawmakers indicated they'd been unimpressed with private fundraising efforts promised by park boosters for construction projects left to complete at the park.

In recent months, SANCA staff appear to have taken notice of critics who have questioned how the park benefits average residents. The nonprofit has hired a community programming manager and shifted marketing efforts to reinforce what park leaders say has always part of the plan — to create a facility that is as much an asset for community members, as a hub for elite athletes.

Until now, \$10 million in state funding and \$19.5 million in Sarasota County tourist taxes has been invested in dredging, shaping and building the park. And for the past several years, park staff has maintained they need \$22 million more to build a finish line tower, boathouse and other structures that would complete the venue. Its fundraising arm, the Nathan Benderson Community Park Foundation, has already raised more than \$5 million for the park's finish line tower. (Paperwork and communication issues between the foundation, SANCA and the county pushed construction back six months.) But another \$17 million is needed for structures such as a boathouse, which park staff say is crucial for the venue to turn profits and become self-sustaining.

Bennett's request to legislators indicates that park boosters still plan to match a potential \$11 million donation from the state with private donations. If the park boosters raise up to \$11 million, and the state gives another \$11 million, then private dollars would account for roughly 20 percent of the park's \$52 million estimated price tag upon completion.

Steube, who is sponsoring the request, said it is too soon to say whether the House might considering inserting the request in its budget. Assurance that the park is actively fundraising is important, he said.

"There's been some challenges in the last couple of years, and I think they've been working to resolve those," Steube said. "Certainly with the Governor's Office they want to see that there is either an industry buy-in or local buy-in for the projects and we're not just giving a blank check for a certain amount of money."

It hasn't always been clear how much the park foundation has raised privately for the park. As a nonprofit, the foundation is required to file tax forms. But because of "insufficient activity" prior to the close of 2014, the organization isn't required to file a full form until May, said Benderson Development Chief Financial Officer Al Wolfson, who works with the foundation.

Last year, after park staff had once again requested funding, Bennett told a Herald-Tribune reporter that the foundation had raised more than \$9 million from private undisclosed sources and expected to hit \$11 million. But some of those funds were commitments contingent on whether the state contributed and the legislature did not reserve money for the park in 2015.

This year, after county commissioners prepared to sign off on finish tower construction at the park, documents submitted to the county show the foundation has \$4.7 million in its bank account, as well as an additional \$2.5 million from the

Benderson family. Scott Anderson, the Senior Philanthropic Advisor at Gulf Coast Community Foundation who announced he would help the foundation launch a major gifts program, did not return calls.

Bennett said the \$7 million total figure was "pretty close."

"We're still out fundraising," Bennett said. "We have a long way to go."

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