

The Importance of Partnerships: Creating an Economic Impact with Fishing Tournaments

Capstone Project
Tennessee Certified Economic Developer Certification



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Introduction

In a small rural area, finding ways to create an economic impact can be difficult. Manufacturing is the lifeblood of most rural areas, but this industry can be fickle. If a manufacturing plant that employs 200 people in a small community decides to close its doors, that makes a huge impact on the economy of that area. The ideal solution is to diversify the economic development assets of the small community. This, of course, is easier said than done. If a county is fortunate enough to have natural assets that foster economic growth, diversifying is made abundantly easier.

Hardin County is one such county.

Hardin County Background and Economy

Hardin County is a rural county located approximately 140 miles Southwest of Nashville and 120 miles East of Memphis. It is commonly described as located where Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama meet. The county seat of Hardin County is Savannah, which is considered a retail and commercial hub for the surrounding region with Wal-Mart, Lowe's, a new Burkes Outlet, and an abundance of local shopping. Hardin County is home to not only a national park, Shiloh National Military Park, but also to a state park, Pickwick Landing State Park. The Tennessee River runs North through the middle of Hardin County bisecting it into East and West. At the southern end of the county sits Pickwick Lake. Pickwick Lake is a 67.34 square mile lake that extends into Northern Alabama. Pickwick Lake was created in the 1930's with the construction of Pickwick Landing Dam.

Hardin County's population, according to the 2019 census estimate, is 25,652, which is a 1.4% decrease from the 2010 census number of 26,008. The average unemployment rate for Hardin County in 2019 was 4.3%. According to the US Census, the median household income for

Hardin County in 2019 was \$40,682 which was \$12,638 below the state median household income of \$53,320.

The decline of a population affects economic growth by reducing workforce and creating less need of services such as hotels, restaurants, and stores. When communities see these services starting to decrease, this generates the opportunity to stimulate economic growth with alternative methods such as sports tourism, including fishing tournaments and youth sports tournaments. The growth created by these alternative methods will increase the need for these services once again and create the economic growth desired.

Hardin County Convention & Visitors Bureau Information

Economic development in Hardin County is composed of three separate entities, Hardin County Convention & Visitors Bureau (Tourism), Hardin County Chamber of Commerce and Savannah Industrial Development Corporation. In the early 1990's the Hardin County Tourism Committee was formed to increase tourism in Hardin County utilizing the natural assets of the Tennessee River and Pickwick Lake while also marketing Shiloh National Military Park and Pickwick Landing State Park. By the end of the decade the Hardin County Tourism Committee was dissolved, and the Hardin County Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) was established.

Description of the Opportunity and Need that the Project Addresses

According to a 2016 study completed by the Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency, the “forecast for bass fishing on Pickwick Reservoir was good with moderate to good year classes produced in seventeen of the last eighteen years.” In the Pickwick Reservoir, 51% of the fish caught by anglers in 2016 were largemouth bass. According to a recent bassmaster.com article, Pickwick

Lake is a great spot for smallmouth and largemouth bass alike and “Pickwick’s pedigree for both species makes it worthy of a high ranking in the Bassmaster Top 100 Lakes list.” In 2020, bassmaster.com looked at historical data dating to 2012 to compile the top 100 bass lakes of the decade. In this study, Pickwick Lake ranked at number thirteen in the nation.

While the Southern end of Pickwick Lake in Alabama has been utilized for fishing tournaments for several years, the portion located in Hardin County has not. Thanks to the Hardin County Convention & Visitors Bureau and their leadership, this is about to change.

The Hardin County Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) is the tourism entity for Hardin County. As tourism is Hardin County’s largest economic development asset, the CVB is integral to the growth of Hardin County. While Hardin County has an Industrial Development Board in Savannah Industrial Development Corporation (SIDC), available land for industrial expansion is limited. Business retention and expansion is the primary focus of the SIDC, with a secondary focus on developing land for future industrial growth. Seeing an opportunity to create an economic impact to Hardin County by utilizing Pickwick Lake for fishing tournaments, the CVB started scheduling smaller fishing tournaments in 2018, such as the TN Bass Nation High School/Youth Tournament in September 2018. During the month of September 2018, Hardin County saw an almost 6% increase in sales tax revenue over the same month in 2017.

Encouraged by this information, the CVB continued to pursue the smaller fishing tournaments. Over the last few years, the number of fishing tournaments has continued to grow to several smaller tournaments per year.

In 2019 the State of Tennessee invested over \$11 million into the Pickwick Landing State Park Inn, transforming it into The Lodge at Pickwick Landing. In 2020, the CVB and local government officials met with Dennis Tumlin, Chief Customer Officer with the State of

Tennessee, and a representative with Fishing League Worldwide (FLW). At this meeting, a proposal was presented to Hardin County to host the 2021 FLW Series Championship. After discussions, the decision was made to make an investment in the economic growth of Hardin County and to agree to host the tournament.

Applicable TCED Coursework

Lessons learned in TCED Coursework will be essential to the process of making Hardin County a “fishing destination”.

In the Tennessee Basic Economic Developers Course, one lesson was how fishing tournaments can change the economic landscape of a community. Dennis Tumlin, who at the time was the Director of Rhea County Economic and Community Development, spoke to the class about “The Power of Marketing and Branding for a Rural Community: A Rural Success Story” and how that worked in Dayton in Rhea County, Tennessee. The class was informed of how the monies that fishing tournaments brought into the community helped Rhea County to fund site development which in turn helped Rhea County Economic and Community Development to attract a large industry. The increase in visitation spurred the addition of hotels and restaurants to the area as well.

The importance of having a plan was learned in Tennessee Strategic Planning for Economic Development. A strategic plan is critical to any vision. Hardin County’s vision of becoming a destination for fishing tournaments with national coverage cannot happen without a plan. One takeaway from this course was “You have to get in front of growth and prepare for it.” This is being done by making improvements to boat ramps and docks at Pickwick Landing State Park that will ease the way for larger fishing tournaments. This course also suggested to have subject

matter experts to come speak to local leadership. Hardin County invited Dennis Tumlin to come speak about the impact that fishing has had on Rhea County in the 8 years they have been a host community.

In the Tennessee Marketing and Attraction Course, the value of marketing a community was discussed. The suggestion was made to hire an agency, which Hardin County CVB did in 2017. This agency does marketing and website development. Rack brochures were also suggested. Hardin County CVB recently updated their Fishing Guide brochure to represent the area more accurately. They have also hired a photographer to take updated pictures of the area to use in the marketing materials.

Trends Identified in Research

The economic impact of fishing tournaments has been researched extensively. The idea for competitive fishing first occurred in the form of bass tournaments in 1967, when Ray Scott “thought of the idea while watching a basketball game.” (Erickson, 2015) This project will concentrate on bass tournaments as they are the most prevalent in Hardin County.

Several professional bass tournaments are held each summer in Clinton County, New York on Lake Champlain. Dr. Stephen Henry of the State University of New York at Pittsburgh conducted an Economic Impact study in 2015 on this area in comparison to a similar study completed in 2012 by Dr. Colin Read of the State University of New York at Pittsburgh. Over the course of five years, Clinton County saw significant growth. While the population remained mainly the same, the workforce, labor income and gross regional product increased considerably. The workforce grew by 6%, while labor income increased by 10%. The gross regional product showed an increase of 19.8%. Dr. Henry conducted surveys of 718 anglers in six bass

tournaments during the summer of 2015. Of these surveys, 240 were returned. From these surveys, Dr. Henry concluded that the bass tournaments bring around 1,740 visitors to the area at an average of 2.43 travelers per tournament participant. 63% of the anglers reported making at least 2 or more trips to the area each year. On average, each angler stayed 4.27 nights in the area with 75% staying in commercial lodging, such as hotels, motels, or campgrounds. Daily spending per party averaged to \$254.77, which included \$82.46 in lodging, \$46.35 in food, \$76.17 in gas/oil, and \$49.79 in miscellaneous. This “spending by tournament participants supports a total of 29.2 full-time equivalent jobs in Clinton County, and contributes approximately \$2,168,655 to the gross regional product.” (Henry, 2015)

In completing her thesis for a Degree of Master of Science in Recreation Management, Sara Erickson conducted a study on “The Economic Impact of Bass, Salmon, and Walleye Fishing Tournaments on Host Communities”. For the purpose of this project, the concentration will be on the bass tournament results. The University of Florida looked at the economic impact of a Florida BASS Federation Tournament in 2011. They collected information from 157 anglers. From this information, they found that, on average, a participant in the tournament spent a total of \$703.68. The majority of the expenses were attributed to fuel, for both vehicles and boats, and to lodging. The economic impact was approximately \$100,000.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources also completed a study on the economic impact of tournaments on their host community. They discovered the Bassmaster Elite 50 tournament in Chippewa Falls, WI had an impact of \$2.1 million dollars to the community. In Erickson’s research, she found a study completed by R.D. Ditton that “showed that tournament anglers are motivated by competition and the potential to win money, but also by relaxation, the escape from the routine, being outdoors, being with friends, ...” Due to these motivations, an angler is often

accompanied by friends and family. Spectators often attend the weigh-in event as well.

(Erickson, 2015)

Benjamin B. Boozer, Jr and Jeffrey G. Hooie conducted “An Economic Impact Study of the 2019 Tournament Series and the Freshwater Fishing Industry on the State of Alabama” for the Alabama Bass Trail in January 2020. They determined the “total economic impact of the tournaments within the state of Alabama was \$7.034,119 for 2019.” In this study, a survey of anglers on the Alabama portion of Pickwick Lake was completed. A total impact of \$457,028 was determined for Pickwick Lake for tournaments held in 2019. (Boozer and Hooie, 2019)

In Rhea County, Tennessee, which is comparable in size to Hardin County, they have taken fishing tournaments to another level. Rhea County is located in Southeast Tennessee on Chickamauga Lake. Chickamauga Lake is 56.62 square miles which is only slightly smaller than Pickwick Lake. In 2012, Rhea County leaders decided to harness the popularity of bass fishing in Chickamauga Lake and created the “Fish Dayton” brand. They hosted their first professional fishing tournament, the Walmart Fishing League Worldwide Tour, in 2013. From 2014-2016, Rhea County hosted over 120 fishing tournaments, had over \$15 million in in new investment, two new hotels and five restaurants have been built. In that same time frame, lodging taxes increased by 34.5%.

These are not the only examples of the economic impact that bass fishing can have on a community. According to bassmaster.com, “anglers spent \$14.6 million to fish” Lake Eufaula in Alabama and Georgia. More than \$10 million of that amount came from bass fisherman. The economic impact of the 2020 Bassmaster classic for Birmingham, Alabama had a direct economic impact of \$20.8 million with an indirect impact of \$15.1 million.

These impacts add up to more than just money in the bank. Some communities are using the extra funds to complete projects that seemingly have nothing to do with fishing. In Rhea County, the economic impacts helped the local leadership to be able to invest money in industrial development. This, in turn, was instrumental in landing Nokian Tires for their first North American facility. The Nokian Tire project was a \$360 million capital investment and created 400 jobs in a county of 33,000.

With this information, a conclusion can be made that fishing tournaments create a positive impact on the host community's economy. This impact creates ripples that affect and benefit the entire community.

The Importance of Partnerships

The Hardin County CVB leadership is working diligently to make Hardin County a “fishing destination”. After announcing that the FLW Toyota Series Championship was to be held in Pickwick Lake/Hardin County in October 2021, more opportunities began to arise. As of now, there are 8 fishing tournaments scheduled for Pickwick in 2021. Three of these are planning for more than 200 boats and 400 anglers per tournament. This would not be possible without partnerships. The Hardin County CVB has several partners working towards this goal.

The Hardin County government has agreed to provide part of the hosting fees for two of the larger tournaments using River Resort District funding. For the upcoming budget year, Hardin County and the City of Savannah are considering setting aside a dedicated amount of funds for fishing tournaments. This would give the Hardin County CVB the ability to move quickly on securing new tournaments.

The Tennessee Department of Tourist Development (TDTD) is working closely with the Hardin County CVB to bring tournaments to the area. The Hardin County CVB is utilizing Dennis Tumlin, Chief Customer Officer, as a consultant. Tumlin has guided the CVB in choosing which fishing tournaments will be a good fit for the area. TDTD is financially supporting the fishing tournaments in Hardin County as well as connecting Hardin County CVB with leadership of fishing tournaments that are seeking a location to hold their event. The Hardin County CVB is applying funds from the Tourism Marketing Grant to purchase promotional items, in addition to advertising fishing in print, digital, and social media platforms.

The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) has agreed to provide meeting space and a few complimentary rooms for the event organizers. This will allow The Lodge at Pickwick Landing to sell the remaining rooms at a profit. The Lodge has a total of 119 rooms and five suites. There are also ten standard cabins and seven premium cabins. The renovation done to The Lodge at Pickwick Landing has been vital to attracting tournaments to the area as well. TDEC is also working on different aspects of the park to make it more accessible to boats and more conducive to the weigh-ins for tournaments. They are working with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency to revamp the main boat ramp by adding an access road that will reduce congestion and make it easier to access the boat ramp. They also plan to add courtesy docks at the weigh-in station and dredge the area around the shorter ramp at the marina to allow better access throughout the year.

Locally, the Hardin County CVB is partnering with the Rotary Club of Savannah, the Hardin County High School fishing team, and other local organizations to provide volunteers at the fishing tournaments. Hardin County CVB hired a local marketing firm to develop a new website in 2017. This year they are adding a fishing landing page to promote fishing in Hardin County

and to have a digital spot for all things fishing. Partnering with local restaurants and hotels to provide coupons and discounts to anglers is also an integral part of Hardin County CVB's fishing plan.

Goals and Objectives

Hardin County sees the economic impact that large and small fishing tournaments alike can provide. In months that fishing tournaments have been held, an increase in sales tax and lodging tax has been observed. With the addition of more fishing tournaments, an even more substantial increase is expected. One of the larger tournaments that has been scheduled has an approximate economic impact of \$1.2 million. The goal is for each of the larger tournaments to create an economic impact similar to this one and for the smaller tournaments to be in the range of \$100,000 to \$500,000 economic impact.

The Hardin County CVB leadership is currently creating a survey for anglers to determine what the impact to Hardin County will be. This survey will ask questions regarding spending (lodging, fuel/oil, dining, etc.), practice fishing, distance traveled, age ranges, number of accompanying travelers, and boat owner or co-angler. The objective is that with the survey, the economic impact can be broken down into more detailed information than just the sales and lodging tax numbers will give. Local hotels have agreed to provide information throughout the year as to whether their guests are visiting to practice fish, fish a tournament, or just here to vacation and fish. This information will help to have a clearer perspective of the groups of fishermen the area is attracting.

Knowing what economic impact fishing tournaments are bringing to the area will also help to determine what other kinds of projects would be beneficial to pursue. The City of Savannah is

currently building a public multi-sports complex, the Savannah SportsPlex. It is currently in Phase One, which consists of regulation size soccer/football fields for youth and adult, a concession building with restrooms, and an open-air pavilion. In later phases, there will be baseball fields, tennis courts, a gymnasium building and a walking trail. This SportsPlex will bring in sports tourism. Savannah already hosts softball tournaments at their current fields, but this new complex will give additional space and will create the opportunity to generate a larger economic impact. The model of the fishing tournaments will be used to not only determine the impact but also to develop teams of volunteers and workers to make the sports events more attractive to the teams.

Timeframe

The projected timeframe of this project is 5 years. The expectation is that within that span of time, the true economic impact should be known. Also, in that time, the goal is to have increased the number of fishing tournaments to 20-30 per year. With that number of tournaments, the economic impact will be great enough to create the desired ripple effect on the community. The expectation would be that the fishing tournaments would create enough of an economic impact to make the area attractive to hotels, restaurants, shops, and even industry. The additional tax revenue could help to fund site development to alleviate the issue of lack of available land for industrial expansion.

Results

The goal of the Hardin County CVB is to stimulate economic growth by developing a fishing destination. When the goal of 20-30 fishing tournaments per year with 5-7 having national

coverage is met, the economic impact to Hardin County will be substantial. An increase in sales tax and lodging tax revenue of 5%-10% is the desired goal. By creating a space where fishermen want to come, not only will Pickwick Lake become a place for fishing tournaments, but it will become a place where fishermen want to vacation and bring their families.

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