

Big soccer tourney translates into big dollars for Howard County

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Covenant Park in Ellicott City is one of the six venues playing host to games in the tournament

Starting Friday, a youth soccer tournament will invade Columbia for the holiday weekend and bring in money for the area's hotels and restaurants.

The 36th annual Columbia Invitational Soccer Tournament will host 462 teams, bringing about 6,200 hotel room nights to the area's lodging industry and untold dollars to restaurants and other attractions.

"We're looking forward to this weekend," said Alicia Smith, director of sales for Staybridge Suites in Columbia. The 118-room hotel is sold out this weekend, and all 22 rooms it has set aside for families and children playing in the tournament are booked. Smith said she's been working with tournament organizers for the past four years she's been with the hotel, and the number of families has grown over the years.

"There has definitely been more demand over time," Smith said.

The tournament will bring in teams from 18 states and Canada, from the under-9 age group to the under-19s. More than 275 college coaches will visit during the weekend to scout out the young talent, tournament organizers said.

Teams will play at six venues around the state, mostly in Howard County. Games will be held at Covenant Park in Ellicott City, Olney Soccer Complex in Olney, Western Regional Park in Glenwood, Rockburn Branch Park in Columbia, Cedar Lane Park in Columbia, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and Howard Community College in Columbia.

"Events like the Columbia Invitational are the true foundation of the sports event and travel industry," said Terry Hasseltine, director of the Maryland Office of Sports Marketing. "We really appreciate what they do for the youth sports market. ... It has a tremendous effect."

Elite Tournaments in Mount Airy took over the running of the event in 2005 when the number of teams coming was almost half the number it is now, said Founder and President Michael Libber.

The company runs 16 tournaments over the course of 18 weekends each year.

In 2005, the last time a study was done on the tournament's impact, the event brought \$2 million to the area, but Libber said he predicts the event will bring closer to \$4 million this weekend. Hotel reservations alone account for almost \$1 million of that impact, Libber said.

Hotel reservations are made through The THS Co., based in Hackettstown, N.J. Hotels give up a portion of their rooms for the weekend for the company to fill with families, team members and coaches. Officials from the company did not return phone messages for comment.

Managers from Sleep Inn & Suites in Laurel and Fairfield Inn by Marriott, also in Laurel, said that hotels were booked up completely for the entire weekend.

Adam Weatherford, sales manager for the Fairfield Inn, said that 180 room nights were already booked for each of the next two years.

Clyde's of Columbia, which sits within walking distance of the Sheraton Columbia Town Center Hotel, will be busier than usual from families walking over to the restaurant and from other hotels nearby, said General Manager Paul Kraft. While the restaurant doesn't have many reservations on the books just yet, Kraft said based on what he's seen last year, most diners walk in or make a reservation an hour or half an hour before showing up.

"We'll definitely see a good portion over the weekend," he said. "Saturday will be pretty busy, a lot of them come in the afternoon after games. Some will be here right in the morning."

Between Clyde's and the adjacent Tomato Palace, about 500 people can be seated, Kraft said.