

Star-Telegram

Cotton Bowl offers Arlington a chance for more revenue and exposure

Posted Thursday, Dec. 31, 2009

BY ROBERT CADWALLADER

Special to the Star-Telegram

ARLINGTON — Made from the remnants of a Christmas parade float, Pam Dawson's feathery sign near Cowboys Stadium welcomes the tens of thousands of Cotton Bowl fans and their disposable incomes to her little slice of Arlington — the Lincoln Square shopping center.

But like many others whose business plans have changed since the \$1.2 billion stadium opened in the summer, Dawson sees the bowl's first game in its new home as more than just another revenue booster shot.

"It's sort of like gravy on your dinner," said Dawson, manager of the 27-year-old center at Collins Street and Road To Six Flags. "But long-term, honestly, it's what is your belief in the north Arlington entertainment district? We've been dabbling in the entertainment industry for many years, but now with the stadium, we're more of a major stakeholder."

The temporary impact of the two visiting college teams and fan bases should be significant.

Officials say the AT&T Cotton Bowl Classic matchup of Oklahoma State University and the University of Mississippi, which kicks off at 1 p.m. Saturday, is well on its way to generating an estimated \$30 million in direct spending on burgers, beds and beyond in North Texas.

Harder to measure is what this game means for the three long-term players — Arlington, the Cotton Bowl and Cowboys Stadium.

Officials can't say what kind of direct economic impact the game is having on Arlington, and it's clear that some of the money is still being spent in Dallas. The Cotton Bowl teams and the news media are not among those filling Arlington's hotels. They checked into two Dallas hotels and an Irving hotel, where they have multiyear contracts.

"It's a prestige thing," said Mayor Robert Cluck, who was in the Cotton Bowl stadium for the Cowboys' and the Dallas Texans' first home games in 1960. "It's going to be a great game on [Saturday] and every year after that, and it could lead to even greater things in the future."

Moving to the spotlight

Cotton Bowl officials announced in 2007 that they were moving the game from the stadium in Dallas' Fair Park — its home since 1937 — to the state-of-the-art conveniences and retractable roof of Cowboys Stadium.

They hope the better visibility and protection from the January weather will improve their chances of upgrading the Cotton Bowl to a Bowl Championship Series event. BCS games get more TV money and sponsorships and other advantages that usually generate 10 times the economic impact of other bowl games.

Relocating the Cotton Bowl offices to the sixth floor of Cowboys Stadium — the only non-Cowboys user of the stadium's office space — has generated much attention.

"There have been almost 200,000 people come through the stadium on tours since it opened in June, and the Cotton Bowl offices are on those tours," Cotton Bowl President Rick Baker said. "We're so much more highly visible and high-profile now, and we haven't even played our first game yet."

The bowl will have to wait for a BCS designation. TV contracts run through 2014, but negotiations on the next contracts could start in 2012, Baker said.

"By the time this comes up again, this stadium will have hosted a Super Bowl, a Final Four and an NBA All-Star Game," Baker said. "It will be obvious that this stadium and this area can host the biggest sporting events in the country."

A BCS game would be another feather in Cowboys Stadium's retractable cap. But for now, Cowboys officials say they're thrilled to have the Cotton Bowl as is.

"The college atmosphere and working with the college fan base has been a neat thing for us," said Brett Daniels, director of client services and corporate communications. "There's a lot of tradition and history with the Cotton Bowl. We're proud of our stadium being a part of that history moving forward."

Pregame preparation

All 71,167 seats for the game are sold out.

The stadium has a maximum capacity of more than 100,000, including standing-room-only space for about 20,000. But Charlie Fiss, the Cotton Bowl's vice president of communications, said limiting the seating for the first game would "enhance the fan experience" by giving more elbowroom and easier access to concessions.

Crews have worked round-the-clock since Wednesday morning, cleaning and stocking up on concessions and making other Cotton Bowl touch-ups.

The special playing field, with its wider hash marks and bowl logos, was installed. As soon as the game ends, 40 to 50 workers will spend 18 hours rolling up the turf and rolling down the usual NFL field for the Cowboys and Philadelphia Eagles' NFC East Division title game Sunday, Daniels said.

Meanwhile, the rest of the city is putting on its game face.

Merchants near the stadium — by now veterans of capitalizing on Cowboys home games and other stadium events — are staffing up and offering low-cost parking and shuttles to customers who want to avoid the cost of stadium parking.

Sports bars and other businesses have been working to attract alumni association gatherings and watch parties, as they have with other college games at the stadium.

Brian Olenjack, owner and executive chef of Olenjack's Grille at Lincoln Square, said he expects at least as hefty a boost in lunch customers for the Cotton Bowl as he enjoys from the Cowboys games. He can see a typical weekend crowd of 50 to 60 people swell to 350.

At Humperdink's, assistant manager Tim Brown said he's rooting for Oklahoma State — and a little more activity in the restaurant.

"I'm excited because it's bringing business," he said. "It's been slow the past two weeks. I think it's just the holidays."

Regional showcase

The Cotton Bowl's matchup of Big 12 Conference and Southeastern Conference teams gives the region a chance to show off its attractions to people who live within a day's drive of the Metroplex.

With a couple of mouse clicks, the Cotton Bowl Classic 2010 Web site shows what kind of lodging and entertainment Arlington has to offer. The Arlington Convention & Visitors Bureau worked with Cotton Bowl officials to make sure that information about hotels and trip packages was highlighted, along with information on Dallas and Fort Worth, said Jay Burress, president and chief executive of the bureau.

Burress said he expects almost all of Arlington's 5,500 hotel rooms to be full for the Cotton Bowl.

"It's huge," Burress said. "It comes at a time when it's not an incredibly busy time for the hotel industry, post-Christmas and post-New Year's. So it's just incredible for the hotels to capture this type of impact in a usually dead time."

Baker, the Cotton Bowl's president, has enjoyed the bustle of preparation. Now, he said, the stage is set for the bowl to start the second leg of its history.

But he doesn't mind looking back.

"We've had a lot of great memories," he said Tuesday as snow fell at his new stadium home. "So I can't help but feel a little twang about it. But especially on a day like today, it's not only good to have one of the world's great football stadiums, but also one with a roof on it."

Staff writer Traci Shurley contributed to this report.

[Looking for comments?](#)