

Baltimore makes cut for World Cup bids for 2018, 2022

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Baltimore has made the cut to be one of the 18 host cities included in the U.S.A. Bid Committee's quest to host the 2018 or 2022 World Cup – a selection that could eventually mean \$500 million in revenue for the city.

The announcement Tuesday afternoon by U.S. Soccer President Sunil Gulati was met with cheers, whistles and applause from a small group of city and state sporting officials gathered at the ESPN Zone in Baltimore to watch the news conference on television.



“This is huge,” Terry Hasseltine, the state director of Sports Marketing, said as they gathered to toast each other after the announcement. “The World Cup is the largest event any city could ever host. ...”

Baltimore joins Boston; New York; Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Indianapolis; Tampa/St. Petersburg, Fla.; Miami; Atlanta; Nashville; Houston; Dallas; Kansas City, Mo.; Phoenix; San Diego; Los Angeles; Denver and Seattle to be included in the U.S. bid.

Cities that were eliminated included Charlotte, N.C.; Chicago; Cleveland; Detroit; Jacksonville, Fla.; Oakland, Calif.; San Francisco; Orlando, Fla.; and St. Louis.

Hasseltine, whose office is part of the Department of Business and Economic Development, said Baltimore's logistics of a downtown stadium surrounded by hotels, dining, entertainment and multiple forms of public transportation put it over the edge.

“We also had good partners,” he said referring to the Baltimore Ravens, members of the Baltimore soccer community and city and state officials. “We showed them that the city and the stadium were working in unison.”

Baltimore's candidacy was also boosted by an exhibition game between England's Chelsea Football Club and Italy's AC Milan at M&T Bank Stadium last July. The match sold out more than a week in advance and a U.S. bid committee official attended the game.

“I think we weren't even on the map a year ago, and that Chelsea-Milan game put us there,” said Kevin Healey, general manager of the Baltimore Blast, the city's professional indoor soccer team.

The U.S. committee must submit a final proposal to FIFA, the international soccer governing body, in May. FIFA will announce its selection in December.

If the U.S. is selected, it must whittle down its final package to 12 host cities, meaning there's still a chance Baltimore could miss out on the economic benefits of being a host city – an estimated \$300 million to \$500 million in local and state tax revenue.

With M&T Bank Stadium and FedEx Field – just 34 miles apart – now included in the bid, Hasseltine said there's a chance one of them would be scratched.

“You have to be realistic,” he said.

But he believes both Baltimore and Washington can make that final cut because they provide a nice one-two punch. M&T's smaller size and central location downtown is ideal for early-round play where there's more

activity and attendance is more spread out, while FedEx's 91,000-seat capacity is better for later rounds with larger crowds. M&T seats about 71,000.

Each city would host no more than six games, but playing host goes beyond the 90-minute matches. In essence, Baltimore would be home to a 30-day fan fest with events and entertainment – and lots of opportunities for tourists from all over the world to spend their money here.

Tuesday marked the culmination of a year-long lobbying effort by city and state officials. The U.S. bid committee started with 70 stadiums last April, then whittled that down to 45 in June then to 32 in August.

Those 32 sites were then required to send to FIFA a detailed list of specs including security capabilities, staff, parking and other event necessities and local amenities such as hotels and transportation.

“There's been a lot of leg work and not knowing [if it'll be worth it], and today validated that,” Hasseltine said.

The first and last time the U.S. last hosted the World Cup was in 1994, which was one of the most successful World Cups in terms of attendance and revenue generation. Since then, soccer has grown in the U.S. with Major League Soccer's first season two years later. Youth participation has also increased and soccer is the fourth-most played sport in high schools, behind track and field, football and basketball, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

During the news conference, Gulati said the U.S.' bid package for 2018 and 2022 is even stronger than it was for 1994. With an average of 78,000 seats per stadium and total of 5 million tickets available, the hosting capacity is more than a third larger than it was 16 years ago.