

SPRING TOUR '09: BALLPARK AUTHORITY TAKES ITS BOARDROOM ON THE ROAD



MBA Commissioner Michael Vekich speaks to the Hibbing Chamber of Commerce in October.

The Commissioners of the Minnesota Ballpark Authority are no strangers to Greater Minnesota, having traveled to almost every corner of the state over the last year to talk about the new ballpark. From Fairmont to Hibbing and from Rochester to Wayzata, MBA Commissioners have collectively logged many miles to speak with citizens and civic groups throughout the state. But this spring, the Board is poised to ramp up its outreach to a whole new level, when it embarks on a spring tour that will bring full Board meetings to three different locations in the state.

During their individual speaking engagements, Commissioners typically deliver a light-hearted, informative presentation that hits all of Target Field's high points. They describe the MBA's role and break down the project's financials to show how the public and private money is being spent. They point out the mass transit features of Target Field, explaining how fans along the Hiawatha line will be able to hop a train and ride right to the ballpark's front door. They discuss key MBA initiatives, like the allocation of \$1 million in bond interest earnings to fund district enhancements and public art. And they highlight the distinct differences between Target Field and the Metrodome, including the wider concourses, more restrooms and the state-of-the-art scoreboard system being designed and built by Daktronics of Sioux Falls, S.D. "I really enjoy when we compare and contrast the fan amenities of the two facilities," MBA Commissioner John Wade says. "It's often at that point audiences say, 'yes, this really will be a wonderful, world-class ballpark'."

The idea for the Spring Tour grew out of feedback during these speaking engagements, and the Commissioners' growing realization that many citizens outside the metro area don't actually know much about the ballpark much less the benefits that it's destined to bring to Minnesota. "What we've found is that the public has very little knowledge of the nuances of this project and how it benefits the entire state," explains Commissioner Barb Sykora. "There are a number of misconceptions. Our goal is to make sure people understand all the details." To rectify that, the MBA Commissioners decided to take their individual outreach a step further and bring their monthly Board Meetings to the public. The Board will hold meetings in Rochester, Moorhead, and Duluth during the months of March, June and July 2009, respectively. "This will be a wonderful opportunity for people around the state to gain a better understanding of the project," says MBA Chair Steve Cramer. "But it will also give us, the MBA, a much better idea as to what the public does and does not know about the project and what elements of the design and operation are important to them."

MBA Commissioners have already learned some of that, on a smaller scale, during their individual speaking engagements. At a recent talk before the Hibbing Chamber of Commerce, for example, audience members asked Commissioner Michael Vekich why the ballpark won't have a roof, what events besides Twins games will take place at Target Field and where the pitcher's bullpens will be located on the playing field. Hibbing Chamber of Commerce President Lory Fedo said she hadn't heard much about the ballpark project prior to the speaking engagement. "We learned so much," Fedo said. "I didn't realize the quality of the construction and how integrated the ballpark will be into the community. It's going to be a beautiful building. It's very exciting."

Commissioner Vekich feels the MBA has an obligation to Minnesotans to do this type of outreach. "The questions run the gamut from something as simple as 'when does the ballpark open' to complex questions such as 'what do the proceeds from the sales tax actually pay for,'" Vekich says. "But Minnesotans have a right to know everything about this project because they are making a large investment in it. I'm confident our Greater Minnesota Tour will be very beneficial for everyone. There's a tremendous amount we all can learn."