

Report says a new Spurs arena to generate an extra \$300 million annually. But some critics doubt that.

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Scott Ball For TPR

An economic impact analysis report commissioned by the City of San Antonio for the Project Marvel Sports & Entertainment District has generated mixed reaction among community advocates and city councilmembers.

The report claimed that a new downtown Spurs arena could generate \$318 million in net annual economic impact, but that's been met with skepticism by some.

"It's apparently just a brief summary of conclusions," said UTSA Professor of Public Administration Heywood Sanders. "There's no backup or justification or analysis there ... that's absolutely worthless."

The documents released on the city's website are from a slide show presentation of the report, which the council is scheduled to be briefed on next Thursday.

"It may be the abbreviated summary of an analysis, but it is manifestly not an analysis," Sanders said. "It's no basis on which to move ahead with a project of this magnitude."

The report was primarily conducted by Conventions, Sports & Leisure International (CSL), although the section on the Spurs arena cites unnamed consultants as being the ones who made those economic impact estimates. CSL's summary said the estimates are in line with what they would expect.

The Spurs arena is estimated to cost between \$1.3 billion and \$1.5 billion. The Spurs have offered \$500 million directly to the arena and have asked the city to contribute \$500 million. Bexar County is expected to provide another \$300 million.

Beverly McClure is a leader of the grassroots organization COPS/Metro, which has been critical of development projects like Project Marvel and the San Antonio Missions downtown ballpark.

She said she didn't find the report convincing.

"What a sales pitch, what a PR campaign," she said. "It is slick. I mean, if I wanted to have a report come out to prove that this is the right approach for the city, I mean this is what it would look like."

But she said she didn't believe it was a true independent economic analysis because of CSL's history working with the Spurs and other convention center and arena projects and what its incentives might be.

"One of the things that was pretty telling to me, we actually read the delivery letter that CSL sent to [San Antonio Chief Financial Officer Ben] Gorzell, and it says — I love this — the last line: 'We look forward to contributing to the next phases of project development and implementation,'" she said. "So they absolutely have something to gain from Project Marvel going forward."

She called on the city to get an actual independent economic analysis and delay moving forward with the Spurs arena until at least next year.

District 6 Councilmember Ric Galvan said he was also skeptical of what the consultant had to say.

"Their role is to do this same kind of study in the same kind of form, and push municipal governments in the same direction," Galvan said. "I've never seen a report of theirs that says, 'this will not do well.'"

The report also found that planned upgrades to the Alamodome, Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, and converting the John Woods Courthouse into a music venue could generate \$351 million over 30 years.

The analysis considered spending both inside and outside of the new developments that CSL believes would only come because of their existence. It also took into account the existing economic impact of the downtown area where the Sports & Entertainment District is proposed and the Frost Bank Center.

A new Spurs arena on the site of the former Institute of Texan Cultures in Hemisfair is estimated to generate \$225 million more in direct annual revenues than the \$416 million the Frost Bank Center currently generates.

Taking into account another estimated \$97 million in net indirect economic impact, that brings the net estimated impact for the new arena to \$318 million annually.

District 1 Councilmember Sukh Kaur, whose district would house the proposed Sports & Entertainment District, said the information has strengthened her interest in moving forward with the project.

“It’s really cool to see that we’re receiving this amount of output [over] 30 years, and we saw a smidge of this for [the NCAA Men’s] Final Four,” Kaur said. “It’s like essentially getting to have a Final Four almost every year, so it’s also great to see that.”

She also highlighted how mixed use development surrounding the Spurs arena will generate income for San Antonio, according to the report.

“That’s what I wanted to really focus on, the benefit that we’re getting from that development,” Kaur said. “And even if you just look at that amount, it’s \$2.3 billion in personal income for our residents, in our tax collection it’s over \$100 million.”

The report estimates that the net gain in personal income as a result of the mixed use development is \$1.2 billion, to a total of \$2.3 billion, and the net gain in city tax collections would be just over \$50 million, to a total of \$106.8 million. Both of these gains are estimated over a 30-year period.

District 10 Councilmember Marc Whyte said the report gave him more reason to move forward with Project Marvel.

“I think the economic impact analysis shows what I think most of us expected, which is that this could have a significantly positive impact on our local economy in the next 30 years,” he said.

Whyte said this kind of boost for the economy could help the city’s core service in the long-term.

“We have infrastructure needs, there’s many programs that need funding, etcetera,” he said. “And this project, again, if done right, could provide San Antonio with a significant amount of revenue that could help fund all of these.”

Mayor Gina Ortiz Jones declined to comment on the economic impact report.

CSL did not respond to TPR's request for comment.

The city council will review the report along with a public engagement report next week after a meeting scheduled for this Thursday was rescheduled.