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Events like karate competition 'essential to Greenville and its economy'

Four-day event pumps up local economy and could come back

*By Jenny Munro
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The city of Greenville is hosting 1,600 athletes and 10,000 visitors this weekend with the National Karate Championships and U.S. Team Trials for the Olympics at the Bi-Lo Center.

Organizers said they had never attempted to hold such a competition in a city as small as Greenville, but they said they'd return here in a New York minute.

The competitors and their families agree. They like that the hotels aren't far from the competition venue. They like the restaurants and the family-friendly things to do here. And they want to come back, bringing with them an economic impact of as much as \$5 million.

That's music to the ears of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, hoteliers and restaurateurs who think Greenville should aspire to more events the scale of the karate championships.

The competitions will continue Saturday and will end Sunday with finals matches at 5 p.m. Two local men — Roberto Munoz, 26, and Troy Hirschkron, 25 — will be among 30 competitors in the finals, said Tommy Hood, U.S. national coach who is located in Greenville.

Tickets for the 12 finals matches are \$5, and Hood said he hoped local residents and visitors would jam the Bi-Lo Center for the event. A daily ticket is \$21, and competitions are open to the public.

The event has attracted about 1,600 competitors as well as additional instructors, coaches, referees and family members from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii and international cities, said Darren Myers, director of USA Karate public affairs and marketing.

The event usually generates between \$3 million and \$5 million in revenue for the host city, but this year's competition is a four-day event for the first time, he said.

Large events such as the Karate Competition "are essential to Greenville and its economy," Todd Bertka, the Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau vice president of sales, told *The Greenville News*. "We've been able to develop a destination that visitors respond to. We are a family-friendly destination."

That family orientation can be important when bidding on sports events, such as soccer, lacrosse or fencing competitions as well as the karate championships, he said.

Jake Lease, director of events for the USA-NKF National Championships, said that Greenville, with its central location and host of family-friendly things to do, is a "perfect fit" for the karate group.

"The big ones are important," Bertka said. "The more people, the more economic activity is generated. We don't turn away any business. But our sweet spot is multi-hotel events with 800 rooms or more."

Greenville CVB's dream event is one large enough to affect the economy positively over a couple of days or longer, he said. That provides job security for workers in the hospitality industry and generates retail revenue for area businesses.

"The economic benefits are really fantastic for us," he said.

In addition, successfully handling an event drawing about 10,000 people can be a major attraction to other large events. They sometimes are a little apprehensive about whether a city the size of Greenville can handle that many people, Bertka said.

Myers said of the karate event, "It's going fantastic. The arena setup is wonderful because the crowd is up away from us and they can see it all. There's not a bad seat in the house."

In fact, "It's a good possibility, a very good possibility" that the event will return to Greenville, Myers said.

Competitors and families also said they would like to see the event return to Greenville.

Connor Gannon, 15 and a resident of Mt. Juliet, Tenn., said that as a competitor he's pleased with Greenville competition.

"It's actually pretty good," he said, adding that the Bi-Lo Center is large enough for more mats with more simultaneous competitions than is usual. "The seating is pretty good. It's a lot better than the normal arena," which often is a gymnasium.

Lisa Leger, who competed as did her daughter, said, "This is well organized and a beautiful arena. I would love for it to come back here."

Once the two from Glenview, Ill., are through competing, "We are going exploring," she said.

Mike Hintzel of Cincinnati, Ohio, has two sons competing. "It's set up very nice," he said.

Henry Xu, 8, said he's been studying karate for three years. After his competition, he visited the Children's Museum, proclaiming it "great."

His mother, Yan Xu, said as the two headed out to see more of Greenville that she believes the karate competitions are likely to return here.

The Steadman-Hawkins National Karate Championships and U.S. Team Trials are sponsored by USA Karate, the national governing body for karate in the United States. It operates under the auspices of the U.S. Olympics.

Karate was vying to be an Olympics sport in 2016, Myers said, but lost to golf. The sport now is lobbying for a spot in 2020. Since only 26 sports are allowed, one has to drop out before another is added.

"I think we have an excellent chance," he said.

It also is a sport that children start at an early age. In fact, "Our big focus a lot of times is on the kids," he said. By the time they mature, "They're incredible athletes. They're respectful."

The Team Trials here allow competition winners to compete in the World Karate Championships in Serbia in October, in the Pan American Games in Mexico next year and also in the North American Club competition, also in 2011.