

To: Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission
From: Margie Omero, Momentum Analysis
Re: Findings from recent focus groups
Date: April 28, 2010

Focus group methodology

The MSFC commissioned Momentum Analysis to conduct five focus groups throughout Minnesota. Each group was comprised of 9-11 participants, and lasted approximately an hour and a half. Based on self-reports, participants were selected to be November 2010 voters, to be *not* extreme sports fans who attend over twenty professional sports games a year, and to be *not* following the Metrodome debate extremely closely. Once meeting those qualifications, participants were then recruited to be either “more engaged” in sports or “less engaged” in sports, based on the number of games they attend, and their interest in Minnesota’s professional sports teams. All groups were mixed along gender and other demographic lines. The groups were divided as follows:

- April 13: Twin Cities, less engaged in sports
- April 13: Twin Cities, more engaged in sports
- April 14: Rochester, more engaged in sports
- April 15: Duluth, less engaged in sports
- April 21: St. Cloud, less engaged in sports

Focus groups are qualitative in nature, and so results are not suited for percentages or statistical testing. These focus groups allowed us to examine the words and phrases participants use when discussing this topic, the depth and breadth of their prior knowledge, and the specific information to which they react. Only a valid survey produces results projectable onto the population at large.

This memo identifies patterns across all five groups, and uses participants' own words to illustrate those findings.

"They [the Vikings] are a source of pride for people here in Minnesota."

(St. Cloud)

Sports in general, and the Vikings specifically, define Minnesota

We asked participants to name a word that describes the state, and consensus emerged around "sports," "outdoors," "cold," and "nice." Even non-Vikings fans enjoyed the outdoors or playing sports themselves. And participants fondly discussed the beauty of the state and its distinct weather.

The Vikings are specifically part of Minnesota's sports culture. The games define a season of their own. It's a common theme of conversation, even among non-fans, that unites the state. Many talked of spending time with their families watching the Vikings, and as one Duluthian put it, "it brings us together." Further, the Vikings make Minnesota stand out in the region, either as a rival to the Packers, or as one of the few states in the region with multiple professional sports teams.

Participants are proud of Minneapolis, but most need encouragement (like parking and mass transit) to venture downtown

"It raises the image of the city. You can live here and see your team, instead of driving to Chicago to see your team."

(Twin Cities)

Participants throughout the state are proud of Minneapolis, and recognize it as if not a world-class city, than, as someone in the Twin Cities said, a "mini world-class city." It undoubtedly has the culture, restaurants, bars and events lacking elsewhere in the state. However, even some of the participants we spoke to in the Twin Cities said they spend little time downtown. Most are worried about parking, and getting around without getting lost. Few expressed strong concern about crime, although a few noted the city has more crime than in Greater Minnesota.

More than anything else, the Dome is described as old

While the Vikings describe Minnesota, the Dome does less so. Chiefly, the Dome is seen as old, with few good restaurant options, and a lagging surrounding area. One Duluth participant said, "I do have fond memories of the place, but it is getting old." People who have gone to events at other facilities, whether a renovated older facility (like Lambeau Field) or a brand-new facility (like Invesco Field), take note how they surpass the Metrodome. One Rochester participant gushed, "If we could have a facility like the Colts Stadium, which is gorgeous, I'd like that."

While respondents are typically not following the debate over a new facility, they did, however, know quite a bit about the Metrodome. Most could guess its age (nearly 30 years), and most knew it held events other than Vikings, whether it be concerts, tractor pulls, or amateur baseball and basketball games.

Initial gut reactions to building a new facility are positive

When we first raised the issue of a new facility, respondents were more positive than negative. A new facility sounds like a good idea, given the Dome's age, but there are naturally some questions about the funding sources. In some of our more sports-engaged groups (and even with some of our less engaged participants), there was excitement about a new facility. As we saw throughout our groups, there appears to be more enthusiasm in favor of a facility than opposed to it. As one Rochester participant said, "anything would be an improvement." Said someone in St. Cloud, "Tear it down!"

Preventing the Vikings from leaving is the top driver

"I would feel really awful if the Vikings left. I hope they come to some sort of agreement. It's not going to be a perfect world, but I think they can have some sort of compromise."

(Duluth)

Not all participants knew the Vikings' use agreement is expiring, and that the team has said they would not sign a new agreement in the current stadium. The thought of the Vikings leaving makes building a new stadium seem urgent. Losing the Vikings would be devastating to Minnesota, participants said, and even non-football fans said the state would suffer. In every group, participants lamented the loss of the North Stars and the Lakers, but losing the Vikings would be even worse, many said.

Some participants understandably had some anger at the thought of the Vikings leaving a state with such dedicated fans. Building a new stadium to please the Vikings owners seemed like "blackmail," a few said. But they noted that

even if the state lets the Vikings leave rather than build a new stadium, attracting a new team down the road will still require a new facility. "Either way, we'll need a new facility," said one Duluth man.

Attracting the Final Four or other national events is also important

Most participants recognized—or quickly came to believe—the Metrodome could not currently hold the Final Four or other large scale national events. One Rochester participant explained that a full roster of other events would mean the facility "works" and operates well as an attraction, just in the same way the Mayo Clinic works well as a destination and regional hub. Others noted these events would help the area economically, and be good for state tourism.

Being able to attract those kinds of events is important, albeit not as important as preventing the Vikings from leaving. For one, participants supposed these national events would be less frequent than Vikings games. Secondly, it's easier to imagine the absence of something (the Vikings), than to imagine something new (more national events).

"If we're going to do it, let's do it right"

Participants liked the idea of a retractable roof. They deemed a roof option as essential given the variety of events and the harsh Minnesota winters. Said one participant, "you can't have the Final Four without a roof."

But outdoor events are romanticized as well. Said one St. Cloud participant, "I went to Vikings games when they were outside, and we had our thermos, and it was great!" Others cite the energy at Lambeau Field, as one Twin Cities participant who said, "Lambeau rocks.... When babies are born, they are put on the list for tickets." Said another in the Twin Cities, "There's something about being outdoors." Recalling the importance of the outdoors to Minnesota's self identity, an indoor/outdoor venue would be the best of both worlds.

Participants were similarly inclined to be positive about other major changes that would come with a new facility—a new plaza, better food options, a view of the city skyline, and neighborhood revitalization. If the state was going to go through with building a new facility, they should, as many said, “do it right.” As the discussion wore on, an initially ambivalent St. Cloud participant said, “it sounds so exciting!”

Participants approve of a variety of funding mechanisms

Not surprisingly, some (but not all) participants wanted to know the funding details of a new stadium. But what was surprising was participants’ readiness to pay more for a new facility. We discussed many possible public funding mechanisms, and quite a few were popular. Indeed, even those participants who were initially quite tax sensitive and worried about their own tax burden admitted many of the proposed ideas seemed manageable.

<i>More popular funding mechanisms</i>	<i>Less popular funding mechanisms</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adding slots to state racetracks • The Vikings for the first 10 years, and the existing Minneapolis entertainment tax afterwards • A 0.10% sales tax increase • Taxes with a specified sunset clause 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bar, liquor, or restaurant tax (seen as hurting small businesses) • Car rental or hotel taxes (seen as “sneaky”)

After the Vikings contribution and using additional entertainment taxes, the statewide sales tax was

"I don't mind kicking in a little bit."

(Twin Cities)

most popular revenue stream. Said one Twin Cities participant, “I think that sounds like something the whole state could live with.” Said someone in Rochester, “Okay, that would be pretty painless.”

Adding a new tax for just the seven-county metro area evokes more mixed reactions. Some figured the metro area would benefit disproportionately, and so should pay disproportionately. Others felt, as one Rochester participant put it, “To be fair, people from around the state should pay for it.”

When discussing a new use agreement, one of the biggest questions participants had was not about funding, but about whether the Vikings would be prevented from leaving in a few years time. This, again, reflects participants’ anxiety about the Vikings leaving the state.

All in all, participants feel a new stadium will help the state, and the economy

"I'm thinking we're missing out on revenues with our current Dome. From what I've read about other places where they've rebuilt these facilities, they've increased their revenue by three or four times as much, not just from crowds, but by what they sell, the food, the layout."
(St. Cloud)

When asked to imagine whether a new stadium would help or hurt the state and its economy, participants uniformly said it would help. Even those with some ambivalence, or tax questions still felt a new facility would bring in tourism and be a boon to the area. And of course, preventing the Vikings from leaving would be a good thing.

Others see the excitement over Target Field, and assume a new Vikings stadium would create the same buzz. Said one Twin Cities participant, "People are so excited about the Twins stadium, and everyone wants tickets, don't you think the same thing would happen if we had a new facility for the Vikings? Everyone will be interested and want to go to the game." Indeed, just about every participant we spoke to said they would go to a new stadium for a Vikings game or other event.

Barely any participants said this would drive their vote for their elected officials

Even after nearly two hours of discussion on the topic, the stadium was not a top concern for these

"This is important to me, but I wouldn't say it's my passion."
(Rochester)

participants. Most participants said this issue would be in their personal "top five" or "top ten" list of issues; it was hardly a "top" or "top three" priority for them. As one Duluth participant said, "this is not a big enough issue, compared to the other issues that are out there."

So not surprisingly, not one participant knew their current legislator's position on a new facility. And hardly a single participant across all five groups said this issue would determine their vote for their own legislators. This was, in fact, one of our most consistent findings.

Conclusions

- Sports define Minnesota. The Vikings are a crucial part of that self-identification.
- The Dome is old, and lacks the specialness of other arenas in the country. So people are open to a new facility.
- Few participants know the use agreement is up, and that the Vikings won't sign a new one in the current facility. This is the most important information to participants when deciding how they feel about a new facility.
- Preventing the Vikings from leaving is paramount. A new agreement should also prevent the Vikings from leaving soon.
- A new facility should encourage folks to come downtown through accessible parking and transit, revitalize the surrounding neighborhood, and improve concessions.
- A retractable roof allows spectators to enjoy Minnesota weather, but keep the facility winter-ready.
- There are many acceptable funding mechanisms. Keeping new taxes low is ideal, but not necessary. A 0.10% sales tax increase seems both simple and fair.
- This issue may be urgent (because of the use agreement) but it's not top of mind. Voters, at least at this stage, do not appear to be following the debate closely.
- Legislators seem unlikely to face electoral consequences because of this issue.