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**Capitol View**

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**Should State Funds Be Used for Memorial Stadium Updates?**

There has been no formal request, but speculation runs high that the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Athletic Department may ask for funds to help with the planned $450 million renovation of Memorial Stadium.

Earlier this year the Legislature directed $30 million in state funds to Creighton University in Omaha, including millions to help the private school build new baseball and softball stadiums to accommodate needs for the annual College World Series. School officials said the baseball stadium would be available as a practice field for teams coming to the event which has a nearly $90 million annual economic impact in Omaha.

Memorial Stadium was built a century ago with private donor dollars, and it’s been expanded since, with only donor funds and athletics proceeds. Thanks to the football program, the NU athletic department receives no annual tax dollar, tuition, or student fee support. It’s one of just a handful of college athletic programs nationally that can make that claim and one of four Big Ten schools along with Penn State, Ohio State and Purdue that operate without such funds.

The stadium was built to honor Nebraskans who served in the American Civil War, the Spanish-American War and the 751 Nebraskans who died in Worl War 1. That designation was later expanded to include World War II and the Korean War and the Vietnam War. That speaks to the public interest in the structure. That was also long before the stadium became a Cathedral to Football, as the Sporting News describes it, further noting it is the most intimidating place to play college sports.

NU Athletic Director Trev Alberts says the university has made no decision to request state funds. But he hasn’t ruled it out, either. Preliminary finance plans apparently show a $125million gap to be filled in the project, which calls for $225 million in dedicated private fundraising and $100 million in other athletics-generated revenues.

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Alberts and university officials say it's about more than just football games. Big Red football drives interest among university alumni and donors, raises the school’s profile, and excites and attracts the students who become the future workforce and community leaders of the state.

On a home game Saturday, Memorial Stadium may hold 85,000 fans. Commentators call it the Sea of Red. As such, it is also the fourth largest population gathering in the state, ranking right up there with Omaha, Lincoln, and the Sarpy County MSA. Many state senators and officials are often among that group.

The Legislature’s Revenue Committee Chair, Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, has been a Nebraska football season ticket holder for more than four decades. She told the Omaha World Herald she understands the cultural significance of what happens in Memorial Stadium on fall Saturdays. A packed stadium has been a shared experience in Nebraska for generations, uniting the state from border to border. The University boasts a sellout streak dating back to 1962.

 “It is an important institution for the state of Nebraska — we love our football,” she said. “I think the idea is wonderful. It’s just a matter of priorities.” She added that the University has not yet asked for funds.

A 1921 request for state funds for the stadium, $350,000, was promised but never realized because of a deep farm depression fueled by drought and the loss of World War I farm price supports. In 1964, ticket prices were raised 35 cents to pay for the first major expansion of the stadium. Subsequent renovations and expansions over the years have similarly been funded by football revenues and private donations.

Consultants say the proposed reconstruction of Memorial Stadium would generate $392 million in economic impact for the state of Nebraska, including the creation of 2,700 construction jobs and $159 million in labor income. They add that Nebraska football has a $96 million annual impact on the state, supporting more than 1,000 annual jobs and $36 million in labor income.

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Alberts has made clear the school would not tap any of the tax dollars, tuition or student fees that currently fund the rest of the university.

UNL economist Eric Thompson said there’s no doubt sports venues can spin off jobs, income and tax revenue for local governments and the state. “You have to weigh those things against the public cost.”

If the Huskers are lucky enough to get an invitation to a post-season bowl game, do you suppose that would increase the Legislature’s consideration of funds?

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.