



STAFF PHOTO/ VIOREL FLORESCU

A trio of ice sculptures adorned with the 2014 Super Bowl logo, created by Jimmy's Artistic Creations of East Rutherford, greets visitors of the Big Game Experience conference on May 22 at the Meadowlands Expo Center.

Big game fever hitting the Meadowlands

"People are going to be starved for the experience."

John Saraceno Jr.,
Ridgewood Super Bowl Committee

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Meadowlands establishments are clamoring for ways to win the hearts and wallets of tourists for the upcoming **SUPER BOWL** Super Bowl. Municipalities and non-profit organizations are also looking to get in on the action, dreaming up and making plans to hold unique attractions and generate local commerce and to solicit donations.

Next February, the area will make history with the first ever cold-weather Super Bowl held in a non-dome stadium. Typically the big game is held in warm-weather cities or under protec-

tive roofs. In 2010, the stadium won the bidding to have the event held in New Jersey, which is expected to attract millions in tourism dollars for the area.

At the Big Game Experience Conference & Expo, held on May 22 and presented by Meadowlands Huddle Zone, New York/New Jersey Super Bowl XLVIII Host Committee and the Meadowlands Liberty Convention & Visitors Bureau, officials estimated the event will bring in between \$500 and \$600 million in direct revenue and 500,000 tourists, eager to experience the game even without tickets.

While various businesses are looking to rake in tourism dol-

SEE **BIG GAME**, PAGE A7

AREA NEWS

BIG GAME

FROM PAGE A1

lars or use the game as a chance to entertain clients, not-for-profits and municipalities are also exploring ways to attract visitors.

Ridgewood officials have pulled a move out of the playbook of Bryant Park, planning to build an ice skating rink in the center of a local park, Van Neste Square, close to the train station and downtown shops. The village was approached by the Meadowlands Chamber about how to engage the rest of the football-fan crowd who weren't lucky or rich enough to score tickets.

"We wanted to create an environment to make people feel a part of the festivities, people are going to be starved for the experience," said John Saraceno Jr., who sits on the Ridgewood Super Bowl Committee, adding that they can't all go to NYC. Taking advantage of the promise of extra train service, the committee decided to fundraise the money needed for the rink, the perfect "hook" to generate traffic for other businesses. The committee partnered with the Bergen County Economic Authority, which will pay vendors, collect the donations and hand over any extra to a designated charity, the committee member said.

Ridgewood is also discussing setting up an NFL-sanctioned pop-up store with official merchandise and a possible broadcast by a sports radio station, WFAN, Saraceno said. He advised other towns to identify its own "anchor," such as resident ex-players or spe-

cial activities.

Secaucus officials are dreaming up a winter wonderland with or without the aid of Mother Nature. Mayor Michael Gonnelli said the town will rent snow machines to create an area for snowball fights, sledding and other activities, alongside the millions already spent to renovate the indoor ice rink. The town is considering special restaurant nights, entertainment showcased in tents and a potential partnership with Hoboken or other towns to shuttle visitors.

Home to 16 motels, totaling over 3,000 rooms, Secaucus is a unique town with parking, stores and restaurants. The goal of the promotion is to get people to return to the area even after the game is over, Gonnelli said.

Hackensack will hold a Pre-Game Winter Festival the week before the Super Bowl, featuring dining, music, ice sculptures, free transportation and other activities. "At this moment, most towns haven't done anything but they are starting to get their act together," said Jim Kirkos, president of the Meadowlands Chamber. East Rutherford and Rutherford have created Super Bowl Committees, while North Arlington, Carlstadt and Lyndhurst do not have committees or plans as of now.

At the expo, the Rutherford Downtown Partnership presented the borough as "right in the big game's backyard," accessible by public transit from Met Life Stadium. The RDP promises weeks of Super Bowl-related activities in

January and February of next year, including free shuttle services from area hotels to the downtown for two weeks leading up to the game, rentable parking spaces in the municipal garage with shuttle service to the stadium, a public arts exhibit to benefit local charities called Footballs for Food and other events.

According to John Giancaspro, president of the Super Bowl committee in East Rutherford, the town should have formalized plans by the middle of summer.

The Meadowlands Chamber president gave the examples of Felician College and the Williams Carlos Williams Center as two places that could benefit from Super Bowl fever.

The NFL, the Meadowlands Chamber tourism board and various regional vendors have made scouting visits to the Rutherford campus of Felician College, in particular the recently renovated Iviswold Castle, spokesperson Angela Daidone said. The college itself hasn't made any solid plans for next winter yet, she added.

Williams Center management deferred questions to the Board of Trustees, who didn't return a call for comment. The largest live stage, the Newman Theater, has been closed since October, with no plans in the near future for necessary renovations to re-open it.

The Meadowlands Museum in Rutherford is planning an exhibit showcasing notable native athletics of southern Bergen County.

"We've had some really important people in this area as far as

sports are concerned," Borough Historian and acting Meadowlands Museum Board President Rod Leith said. "It will attempt to draw attention to sports history and famous people that have come out of this area back to the early part of the century, the 1900s."

New Jersey has been divided into five Huddle Zones- the first being the Meadowlands, Bergen County and some northern Hudson County municipalities. Zone 2 is Hoboken and Jersey City, with the greater Newark area making up Zone 3 and Morristown and Florham Park the anchors of Zone 4. The remainder of the state is Zone 5.

In conjunction with Spirit Sales Promotions, the Big Game Experience partnership will host an online posting place for events, street fairs and other specials before and during Super Bowl week, called Meadowlands Huddle Zone, in addition to logo stickers for front windows and a mascot plush character.

A letter was recently sent to all towns in the state by the CEO of the Super Bowl Host Committee Al Kelly and president of the New Jersey Sports Exposition Authority Wayne Hasenbalg, informing them what the committee can do for them, Kirkos explained.

From the perspective of an event planner, even non-profits can hold a "wow event," said Dennis Telischak of Garfield-based Audience Pleasers. Audience Pleasers created its own "wow"- a Casino in the Air. The skybox can

accompany 22 guests up to 150 feet, where they'll be strapped to their seats as they play games like blackjack and poker.

Non-profits and municipalities can hold a dazzling event on a budget by trying to break unusual world records, like the world's largest football player out of balloons, Telischak said. These could also earn corporate sponsorships, who can claim later that these records were broken at their party.

It's important to remember how cold it will be and the potential for snow, Cliff Witmyer, president of Rutherford-based Cliffhanger Productions said. His company has had experience hosting events in San Diego and Miami for their Super Bowls.

There's a lot of money to be made in corporate sponsorships, companies looking to attach their names to a "turn key" program, where the company itself doesn't have to commit time and manpower to planning, Witmyer said. Both locals and tourists will be looking for official merchandise and pop-up stores with NFL products, he added.

New York City will take center stage leading up to Super Bowl Sunday, but New Jersey can "provide local flair and corporate entertaining," said Kirkos. In talking to people attending the expo, Kirkos said he heard time and again "I had no idea this was available," from visitors reviewing vendors' booths, proving the Garden State can be just as entertaining as the Big Apple.

"I think there's a lot of attention

for New Jersey," said president of Fabulous Foods, Fred Luberto. "It's a nice blend of activities in both regions." He commented he didn't believe the two states are in competition for visitors since there's plenty of tourism dollars to be had.

Redd's in Carlstadt, where Gov. Chris Christie celebrated the announcement that the state won its bid for the big game, doesn't know yet what the restaurant will be doing come February 2014, owner Doug Palsi said. Redd's has worked with Met Life Stadium in the past, hosting a park-and-ride for patrons during games, and may do something similar, he said.

At the Big Game Expo, local businesses were out to prove towns and corporations wanting to host parties don't have to look outside the area to find quality vendors.

Owner of Visual Impressions Photography in Wallington, Steven Stack, demonstrated his company can set up a small studio to impose party-goers into Super Bowl scenes using a green screen.

Football helmets with luges built into them, and entire bars made out of ice are on the agenda for Jimmy Chiapa, owner of Jimmy's Artistic Creations, based in East Rutherford.

The Big Game Expo associated partners set up a website at www.thebiggameexperience.com, listing local vendors by service in a further effort to connect regional businesses.

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