



SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 10/17/2025

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and Sonoma County Fair and Exposition Board of Directors
Department or Agency Name(s): Economic Development Collaborative, County Executive Office, and Fairgrounds

Staff Name and Phone Number: Ethan Brown, Katherine DiPasqua, Andrew Sturmfels, Mathew Daly 707-565-4893

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisory District(s): Third

Title:

Discussion of United Soccer League Opportunity in Santa Rosa

Recommended Action:

Receive an update from staff on United Soccer Leagues, LLC interest in the Fairgrounds property and provide direction on next steps, as reflected in this staff report.

Executive Summary:

The United Soccer League (USL) has expressed an interest in expanding into Santa Rosa due to its growing population, strong local economy, high youth soccer participation rates, and a desire to establish a presence in the North Bay. Given this interest, USL began discussions with the City of Santa Rosa about a potential development of a multi-purpose stadium for professional men's and women's soccer. To support the financing and limit any public subsidies required for a new stadium and sports complex, USL is also proposing a mixed-use entertainment district that could include housing, retail, and other uses, along with potentially leveraging tax-increment financing tools. In March 2025, the City of Santa Rosa signed a letter of intent to enter into exclusive negotiations with USL for a period of one year, with an option to extend an additional six months. Through the course of the negotiations, USL and the City of Santa Rosa have identified the Sonoma County Fairgrounds as potential location for the stadium.

The Fairgrounds property is owned by the County of Sonoma and pursuant to Government Code 25905, the Board of Supervisors contracts with Sonoma County Fair and Exposition, Inc. to operate the Fairgrounds. In 2021, the Board approved a five-year agreement with the Fair with a term ending on September 30, 2026 [<https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?From=RSS&ID=5144084&GUID=1813F80A-0C70-489B-99DC-FAD9D84B836F>].

A potential stadium at the Fairgrounds could also accommodate other athletics, including youth sports, and generate new energy, activity, and revenue for the Fairgrounds, at a time when facility use is decreasing due to the wind-down of horseracing. Beyond the benefits to the Fairgrounds itself, a new sports entertainment

complex could bring significant economic benefits to the entire region, including job creation, increased visitation, private investment, and overall contribution to local quality of life.

Today's item will provide the Fair Board and Sonoma County Board of Supervisors with some background on USL, examples of comparable USL stadium developments in California, a timeline of USL and City of Santa Rosa's activities to-date, how County staff have been engaged with this process, and discussion of next steps. USL has also been invited to attend and will provide a brief overview of their interest and current proposal. As part of this item, staff is requesting the following:

1. As a Board of Supervisors and Fair Board, provide feedback to staff on the USL opportunity.
2. Authorize County staff to coordinate with the City of Santa Rosa and USL to amend their existing exclusive negotiations agreement to include the County of Sonoma as an additional party.
3. Direct staff to engage with USL and the City of Santa Rosa to begin next steps, including the study of feasibility, governance, financing models, and development options.
4. As a Board of Supervisors, discuss the request from the Mayor of Santa Rosa to provide a liaison to the City Ad Hoc.

Discussion:

USL Background

The United Soccer League (USL) is the largest professional soccer organization in North America, possessing nearly a decade of experience in bringing professional soccer to communities across the United States and Canada. It has more than 200 clubs in its membership, including Sacramento, Monterey, and Oakland.

Recently, USL has made efforts to expand market presence on the west coast. To that end, several projects have been recently completed or are currently underway. Below are a few examples:

- Lancaster Municipal Stadium located in Lancaster, CA (Team - AV Alta Football Club). Built in 1996 as a baseball stadium and converted to a soccer-specific format in 2025. It has 5,300 seats and currently selling 4,000-4,300 seats per game. The City financed the stadium renovation cost of approximately \$16.2 million with a bond against existing infrastructure, and will be using a combination of operator's fees and future revenues to pay the debt service.
- Heart Health Park located in Sacramento, CA (Team - Sacramento Republic Football Club). The current

stadium was built on the Cal Expo Fairgrounds in 2014 and expanded in 2015. It has 11,500 seats and is also available for alternative uses, including festivals, concerts, and graduations. The stadium was privately funded, and is operated through a public-private partnership between Republic FC, Cal Expo (State of California), and Spectra, the concessionaire. Western Health Advantage has secured naming rights. The current stadium has operated as a temporary location. The City of Sacramento and USL recently finalized plans for a larger, 20,000 seat stadium at the Sacramento Railyards, which broke ground in August 2025. The estimated total development cost of the stadium and related infrastructure is \$220 million, with the stadium making up \$175 million of that amount. The City of Sacramento's Railyards Enhanced Infrastructure Financing District (EIFD) will be contributing \$42 million towards the development costs.

- Modesto, CA (Under Development). In August 2025, the Modesto City Council approved the redevelopment of a City-owned convention space in downtown Modesto for a new USL stadium, along with a second location that will house training fields and mixed-use development, including housing. The City will contribute a portion of the costs with bond financing, using lease payments from USL and anticipated increased sales, property, and hotel tax revenues to pay debt service.

Timeline of USL and City of Santa Rosa Activities

USL first approached the City of Santa Rosa (City) in December 2024 to discuss the potential for building a new professional soccer stadium in Santa Rosa. USL has expressed that Santa Rosa is a prime location for a professional soccer franchise for several reasons: Santa Rosa is the largest city in California's wine country, with a growing population, strong local economy, and a passion for the sport, as evidenced by high youth soccer participation rates.

There are three USL championship level leagues in Northern California: Monterey Bay Football Club, Oakland Roots Soccer Club, and Sacramento Republic Football Club. Since there are no other leagues in the Bay Area or north of Sacramento, a USL club in the area could quickly establish a dedicated fan base while also benefiting from Santa Rosa's location along Highway 101, providing accessibility for regional supporters. Given the growing interest in soccer, particularly among young soccer fans already engaged with the sport, USL believes that a stadium in Santa Rosa has strong potential for sustained attendance, community support, and sponsorship interest, which equates to long-term viability and success.

On March 18, 2025, the City and USL signed a letter of intent to enter exclusive negotiations for one year, with an option to extend another six months, to evaluate options for establishing professional men's and women's soccer teams and building a new multi-purpose stadium in Santa Rosa. The Exclusive Negotiations Agreement (ENA) encompasses both Sonoma and Napa counties, thus protecting the territory by preventing the City from negotiating with competing leagues and USL from negotiating with other cities in the region.

City staff discussed the ENA and the USL opportunity with the City Council on April 15, 2025, where the City Counsel expressed their support in moving forward with USL [<https://santa->

rosa.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7295900&GUID=BF0798F2-EB00-4C5E-871C-432D4924B10D&Options=&Search=]. Following that presentation, USL began meeting with key stakeholders in the market. In May 2025, USL commissioned Sports Facilities Companies (SFC) to conduct a preliminary market feasibility analysis, which is expected to be complete in October 2025.

In June 2025, the City began to conduct public outreach to solicit feedback on the USL opportunity. This included a “Coaches and Clubs” meeting held at City Hall to connect local soccer leaders with USL on June 3, 2025, and a public open house at the Epicenter in Santa Rosa to introduce the ENA and gather community input on June 4, 2025. Staff representatives from the County and Fairgrounds participated in this event.

On June 3, 2025, the City Council established an internal ad hoc committee to support USL exploration composed of Santa Rosa Mayor Mark Stapp, Santa Rosa Councilmember Jeff Okrepkie, and city staff [<https://santa-rosa.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7408436&GUID=F10258C6-AA17-497E-B29B-D3489E644A04&Options=&Search=>]. The ad hoc began meeting in July 2025 to review the status of negotiations with USL, establish structure and goals for the group, and engage with local stakeholders. As part of that engagement, on August 28, 2025, Mayor Stapp sent letter to the Board Chair requesting that the County assign a representative to participate in the City’s Ad Hoc (Attachment 1).

Fairgrounds Site

Over the past several months, the City has worked with USL to evaluate multiple potential sites throughout Santa Rosa. This includes City-owned sites, private property, underutilized public areas, and the County-owned Fairgrounds. USL has shared their desire to be closely situated to densely populated areas, public parking, modes of transportation, and supporting retail. As a result, the City’s review of potential sites has focused on locations that are situated near the Highway 101 and Highway 12 interchange. Site orientation is another important factor in site identification, as USL standards require a north-south axis for the stadium to minimize the impact of the sun on players. Given these factors, USL has indicated a strong interest in the Fairgrounds (Attachment 2).

The Sonoma County Fairgrounds, now branded as the Sonoma County Event Center, has been a central community gathering place in Santa Rosa since 1936, with the purpose to perpetuate community engagement in agricultural education. The Fairgrounds site is a 200-acre, multi-use complex with six meeting and exhibition halls, two open-air arenas, one covered arena, equestrian facilities, RV Park, golf course, 5-acre lawn area, and shaded parks (Attachment 3). From its founding, the Fairgrounds property is meant to host the annual County Fair, featuring a horse racetrack and agricultural exposition to promote Sonoma County's farming community. Beyond the fair, the property hosts over 200 annual events, including festivals, concerts, trade shows, cultural events, and private gatherings.

In April 2025, the Fair Board announced the cancellation of horse racing for the annual fair, a nearly 90-year tradition. This decision was driven by the declining horse population in Northern California, partly due to the

closures of other tracks like Golden Gate Fields. With the horse track no longer in use, the Fair Board is considering new development opportunities, such as a community driven multi-use sports and entertainment facility that can also serve as a resiliency center during times of need.

Development of a professional soccer stadium aligns with the Fair's mission to be a "community gathering place" that provides entertainment and showcases local talent. The new venue could attract a diverse and younger demographic, while also ensuring the site remains dedicated to hosting an annual fair. A development of this nature would establish the Fairgrounds as a central hub for community events and entertainment for the long term and will lift the surrounding communities economically.

County Engagement & Work Completed To-Date

Because of USL's interest in the Fairgrounds, City staff reached out to County staff in April 2025 to begin coordination. In May 2025, an informal workgroup was formed with staff from the City, Sonoma County Economic Development Collaborative (EDC), and the Fairgrounds. As part of these discussions, the EDC and Fairgrounds staff coordinated with Sonoma County Public Infrastructure to initiate a guaranteed title search of the entire Fairgrounds property. The Fairgrounds is composed of eighteen separate parcels that have been acquired over a period of almost a hundred years. The guaranteed title reports were received on October 9, 2025, and are now with County Counsel for review. County Counsel is also exploring any potential land use or legal restrictions related to a potential lease or sale of a portion of the Fairgrounds property for development.

In August 2025, Supervisors Hopkins and Coursey and representatives from the Fair Board met with staff to discuss the USL opportunity, the City of Santa Rosa's activities to-date, and to identify next steps. The outcome of that meeting was a shared desire to schedule a joint public meeting for the Board of Supervisors and Fair Board, where they could further discuss the opportunity and provide direction to staff on how they wish to further engage with USL and the City.

Proposed Next Steps & Timeline

The City of Santa Rosa and USL are evaluating several sites in Santa Rosa, but interest in the Fairgrounds site remains strong. As part of this special meeting, staff recommend that the Board of Supervisors and Fair Board hear a presentation from staff and USL on the potential project and provide initial feedback to staff.

Should the Board of Supervisors and Fair Board wish to continue discussions with USL about a potential professional soccer stadium, and additional potential of including mixed-use development at the Fairgrounds, staff is recommending the following next steps.

1) Authorize County staff and County Counsel to coordinate with the City and USL to amend their existing exclusive negotiations agreement to include the County of Sonoma as an additional party.

USL has indicated that they are hoping to have a site identified by the end of 2025. By amending the ENA to include the County of Sonoma, as the owner of the Fairgrounds, USL can begin their site due diligence and

feasibility analysis. As stated above, the County appointed the Sonoma County Fair and Exposition, Inc. as its agent for management of the Fairgrounds and recognize the Fair Board may prefer alternate uses on that site. County staff will ensure coordination with Fair Board representatives throughout the evaluation process.

USL anticipates the evaluation process will take roughly one year, and would include the following activities:

1. Conduct Test Fit and Begin Conceptual Design on Preferred Site
2. Develop Initial Funding Model Including Public Funding Research
3. Get Alignment from Stakeholders on Site Plan and Funding Mechanisms
4. Perform Feasibility Studies
5. Develop Team, Stadium and Real Estate Projections

Once due diligence is completed, should USL, the County, and the Fairgrounds wish to move forward in negotiations, USL and the County would advance the ENA into a Memorandum of Understanding for development. Should USL ultimately decide on a different site, the County and City would still have a joint ENA with USL available to continue to work together on future potential projects.

2) Direct staff to engage with USL and the City of Santa Rosa to begin next steps, including the study of feasibility, governance, financing models and development options.

3) As a Board of Supervisors, discuss the request from the Mayor of Santa Rosa to provide a liaison to the City Ad Hoc.

The Board of Supervisors' Rules of Procedures (Board Rules) does not include guidelines for County Supervisors participating in another jurisdiction's Ad Hoc Committee. It is unclear at this time what role or authority the Supervisor would have in the City's discussions, and therefore staff recommend waiting until after the initial feasibility analysis is completed before making a determination on this request.

Strategic Plan:

N/A

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

Prior Board Actions:

None

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY25-26 Adopted	FY26-27 Projected	FY27-28 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	\$35,487		
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures	\$35,487		

Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF	\$22,862		
State/Federal			
Fees/Other	\$12,625		
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			
Total Sources	\$35,487		

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The total costs incurred to-date for preliminary investigation of the USL opportunity is \$35,487. This includes \$25,250 for the title reports on the Fairgrounds property and \$10,237 of County Counsel time billed to the EDC. The costs for real estate due diligence are being split 50/50 between the EDC and Fairgrounds. All costs incurred to-date are within EDC's existing FY 2025-26 budget allocations. Looking forward, should the Board wish to continue negotiations with USL, County Counsel estimates an additional 30 hours of staff time reviewing feasibility studies, governance, financing models, and development options. It is possible that this additional effort will exceed EDC's available appropriations for County Counsel, and staff may need to return to the Board of Supervisors at a later date with a funding request.

Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

Existing staffing allocations are sufficient to manage this process at this time.

Attachments:

Attachment 1: Letter from City Mayor to Board Chair

Attachment 2: USL Memo Regarding Fairgrounds

Attachment 3: Map of Fairgrounds

Attachment 4: Staff Presentation

Attachment 5: USL Presentation

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

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