

Why Bedford Park taxpayers are sponsoring the White Sox

By Danny Ecker January 25, 2016

The list of companies and brands backing the Chicago White Sox in 2016 has some familiar names: Miller Lite, Wintrust, Athletico, to name a few.

But one addition to the team's **sponsorship roster** this year stands out among the rest: the taxpayers of Bedford Park.

The southwest suburban village this season begins the first year of a two-year, \$384,000 agreement as a Sox marketing partner, joining the ranks among the official beers, banks and car brands of the South Siders.

Call it the Pale Hose's official industrial municipality, if you will.

The town is far from a traditional professional sports team sponsor, and it's unlike your typical Chicago suburb making noise about why city dwellers should move their families there.

The industrial municipality tucked between Midway Airport, Interstate 294 and the Stevenson Expressway is dominated by rail yards and factories—most notably a major manufacturing plant for Westchester-based food processing company Ingredion. With a population of less than 600 people, it has only about three residents for every two businesses located within its borders.

But its valuable spot on Chicago's border makes it attractive for companies seeking to tap into Chicago's population and logistically friendly location while avoiding its red tape and taxes.

That's a message it's trying to drive home to business owners and decision-makers, using the White Sox as its soapbox.

"We're trying to give businesses confidence," Bedford Park Mayor Dave Brady said. "We have a home and small town feel that can serve the needs of a big business."

HOMEcomings THEME

The village will be the presenting partner of three of the team's "Free T-Shirt Thursdays" promotional nights and receive shout-outs on White Sox radio and television broadcasts.

But the centerpiece of the deal is a "homecoming"-themed weekend at U.S. Cellular Field during a late May series against the defending champion Kansas City Royals, for which it will be a presenting sponsor.

That aligned well with the working slogan of "Bring your business home to Bedford Park," Brady said.

The sports spotlight seems to have worked for Bedford Park before. After its first Chicago sports advertising foray a few years ago—a radio campaign that ran during Chicago Blackhawks broadcasts—the village saw a \$1 million increase in property tax revenue.

Not all of it may have been directly attributed to the ads, but village Administrator Frank Basile said there were about 10 businesses that set up shop in the village during the year after the Blackhawks radio campaign aired—all of whom mentioned that the radio spots turned them on to Bedford Park.

That prompted the village to expand its radio ads during Blackhawks games on WGN-AM/720 and advertise during WBBM-AM/780's "Noon Business Hour," as well as during White Sox radio broadcasts on WSCR-AM/670.

The village is paying about \$400,000 this year to run radio ads on WGN during Blackhawks games and on WBBM during Chicago Cubs broadcasts.

But sponsoring the Sox directly instead of simply advertising on their new radio flagship, WLS-AM/890, gives the village a chance to do more "active advertising," Brady said. That includes getting plugs on Sox TV broadcasts that may be seen outside the Chicago area. "It's also a good opportunity to advertise to out-of-state businesses," he said.

TRYING TO HIT THE TARGET

Municipal marketing isn't a new concept. It grew quickly coming out of the Great Recession with towns and public entities partnering with corporate sponsors to help save money.

But most of those deals are brands subsidizing municipalities—think Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Illinois' **sponsorship** of Chicago's Divvy bike-sharing program.

Bedford Park is flipping that script with its Sox contract, betting that plastering its name on team giveaways and getting shout-outs during game broadcasts will help drive businesses to set up shop in the 6-square-mile town.

"There are going to be sports teams and properties that can help (municipalities) reach people of influence who ultimately will be making decisions on where to place their businesses and maybe even where people live," White Sox Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing Brooks Boyer said.

Chicago-area municipalities don't stand to be a major new sponsorship category for the area's pro teams. But if the Sox can prove an effective tool for Bedford Park in reaching business leaders, it could be a blueprint for other villages.

"The question is, 'How targeted is the audience that you're reaching in the stadium?' " said Jim Andrews, senior vice president at Chicago-based sponsorship consulting firm IEG. "You don't necessarily need everyone walking through the turnstiles at the Cell getting info or being exposed to Bedford Park's marketing message."

Brady said the village is marketing itself aggressively now because of the threat of a property tax freeze **floated last year** by Gov. Bruce Rauner. That could put a brick on a revenue source that accounts for more than a third of Bedford Park's \$30 million annual budget.

Other municipalities whose budgets hinge on healthy property and sales tax revenue share that fear and are already following Bedford Park's lead.

The village of New Lenox just east of Joliet, for example, launched an ad campaign last year on CBS radio during Bears, Cubs and Sox games in the wake of Bedford Park's success.

"It's a significant investment, but the reality is if you bring in one grocery store, the sales tax alone pays for it," New Lenox Mayor Tim Baldermann. "What (Bedford Park has) done certainly served as a model."
