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RSL cheers its crowd, near tiniest in league

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Real Salt Lake recently celebrated selling its 6,000th season ticket, heralding the achievement as a 1,000-seat jump from the team's inaugural 2005 campaign.

Problem is, that milestone represents 2,000 fewer tickets than the franchise's own business plan projected for 2006. And, entering its second home game this past weekend, RSL ranked 10th in attendance - out of a 12-team league.

Despite that, RSL anticipates boosting season tickets to 8,800 next year and 10,560 in 2008, when the team expects

to move into

a 20,000-seat stadium in Sandy. By 2015, the franchise predicts nearly 12,500 season-ticket holders.

Those figures are reported in RSL's internal operating model - obtained by *The Salt Lake Tribune* - which team executives fought to keep confidential.

Once in the new stadium, RSL anticipates collecting a new source of revenue by renting the facility to sponsors of other events. The team is banking on \$421,000 from rent in 2008 and \$676,000 in 2015.

RSL also expects revenue from concessions to balloon from \$1 million that first season in Sandy to nearly \$2 million seven years later.

The fledgling franchise also projects hosting 15 concerts a year, with an average attendance of 17,500. Average ticket price: \$30 in 2008, soaring to \$42 in 2015.

All this against a backdrop of a record 17-game losing streak despite having the fifth-highest payroll in Major League Soccer.

Before the team can break ground on its stadium this summer, officials hope to secure \$45 million in public funding for land and infrastructure from Salt Lake County and Sandy. But that deal is far from final.

"We haven't even done an examination to see if they're well-grounded or not," Salt Lake County Chief Administrative Officer Doug Willmore said Monday about the team's numbers.

This much is clear: The upward trend in tickets runs counter to what other MLS franchises have seen over the league's 10-year history. Attendance across the MLS is down 13 percent from 17,400 a game in 1996 to 15,100 a game in 2005.

RSL brass refused to elaborate on the projections Monday.

"Under our attorneys' advice, we cannot comment on a document that was provided to you illegally," said Tom Love, RSL spokesman.

"We are a private enterprise," RSL Chief Executive Officer Dean Howes said Friday. "What the public doesn't have a right to know is confidential information."

Team officials have said the estimates include a one-time exhibition this summer - perhaps with Real Madrid - which, if booked, is included in season-ticket packages. The game, they argue, could vault RSL into the top three in season-ticket sales. All that, they note, from the team in the smallest market with the worst record.

"Pro formas are not snapshots of history," Howes said earlier, while defending predictions in the document.

Still, the team reaffirmed its vow to pursue "with full vigor" every legal recourse against whoever leaked the numbers.

Howes insists confidentiality agreements were signed by the Salt Lake County mayor's and County Council offices.

Not so, counters Willmore, noting a formal complaint has yet to be filed with the District Attorney's Office.

"It's pretty specious," he said.

A meeting between team officials and the mayor's office is scheduled Wednesday.

On the concert front, RSL's projections seem to defy the turnout for summer shows at another 20,000-seat outdoor venue - West Valley City's USANA Amphitheatre. RSL is predicting 15 shows a year with an average attendance of 17,500. USANA has seven shows booked this summer. Average attendance figures were not available.

Another conflict: United Concerts will have a role booking events at both places - in essence, competing against itself.

Multiple calls to United Concerts President Jim McNeil were not returned.

But County Councilman Joe Hatch said the Salt Lake Valley needs another outlet for popular music, which he defines as rock, hip-hop and country.

"Because of the nature of the venues we have, we do not get a lot of the large touring shows," Hatch said.

Even without the rock, RSL executives are counting on \$1.4 million a year in naming rights once they sell the stadium moniker to a sponsor.

And, according to their operating model, they predict more than 20,000 fans a game starting in 2011.

"Over the years, we've seen plenty of projections that don't pan out," said Mike Jerman, vice president of the business-backed Utah Taxpayers Association. "Taxpayers get left holding the bag."

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