

## **Social Anchor of the Pelican State: Intangible Benefits and Economic Impact of the Superdome**

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### **Abstract**

The Louisiana Superdome has had tremendous impact on the Gulf Coast region since its opening in 1975. With the region, the Superdome has had to adjust to potential economic, social, and infrastructural changes alongside natural disasters by opening as a shelter of last resort during hurricanes. The total direct economic impact from stadium operations was estimated to \$934.28 million during the first ten years of operations of the stadium from 1975 to 1984. It important to analyze how much this facility has economically impacted the region in the first ten years of operations as well as social impacts. As the NFL's New Orleans Saints prepared to play in their first game in the Superdome post-Katrina in 2005, Chris Rose, a former columnist in the *Times-Picayune*, stated, "The Superdome, for the past year, an icon of our national disgrace, is now a cause for celebration. The Superdome is the most visible building on our city's skyline. Its durability is our durability" (Rose, 2006, para. 2).

**Keywords:** Superdome, social anchor, intangible benefits, economic impact

### **Introduction**

"My God Mr. Dixon! That would be the greatest building in the history of mankind and we'll build that sucker!", Governor of Louisiana John McKeithan said to Dave Dixon in a 1964 meeting in Baton Rouge (Higgins, 2009, p.4). The "greatest building in the history of mankind" was determined to be the Louisiana Superdome, now Caesar's Superdome, an integral piece of the economy and psyche of Louisiana making

New Orleans a great host for sport mega events (Higgins, 2009; Chighizola, 2012). Baade (1996) states that the Superdome is arguably the most elaborate and expensive structure in real terms of any stadia built in the United States. However, its value within the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana extends beyond its status as the mecca of mega sporting events in the Gulf South (Higgins, 2009). When the idea of the Superdome originated, the NFL was exploring the possibility of awarding another expansion franchise (Haas, 2014). The mayor of New Orleans at the time, Victor Schiro, and Dave Dixon, the Chairman of the New Orleans Sports Commission, understood the potential economic, social, and infrastructural impact of constructing a modern, all-weather sports facility and thereby wooing a professional football franchise to their city (Haas, 2014). Additionally, the city was trying to emerge from post-Jim Crow era of racial strife and segregation (Germany, 2007). Schiro believed a move to add an NFL franchise could unite the city and transcend political, social, and racial division (Haas, 2014).

While the Superdome is now considered by many a symbol of pride and resiliency for the city of New Orleans, there were many obstacles to overcome to get to the finish line (Higgins, 2009). In the 1960's, the city and state wanted assurances from the NFL, that if they did build the Superdome, the NFL would grant New Orleans an expansion franchise (Haas, 2014). A boycott of the AFL All-Star game in 1965 due to mistreatment of African American players in the French Quarter highlighted some of the racial injustices that continued to scar the image of the city (Haas, 2014). Concerns regarding the city's record of race relations worried many in their hopes of landing an NFL franchise. However, Schiro and McKeithan made sure they had a proverbial ace up their sleeve, two very influential Congressmen from the state of Louisiana, Senator Russell Long and Representative T. Hale Boggs. As the NFL moved closer to seeking a merger with the AFL, it also needed help from Congress to grant them antitrust immunity for the merger. Right on cue, the two Louisiana congressmen played an important role in ensuring the antitrust legislation passed. Unsurprisingly, less than two weeks after the antitrust legislation passed, New Orleans was granted the 16th NFL franchise on November 1, 1966, which also happens to be All Saint's Day in the Catholic liturgical calendar (Pramschufer, 2016).

Prior to the construction of the Superdome, New Orleans was a city that was trying to emerge as a dynamic hub for commerce and tourism in the post-Jim Crow south and signs were emerging that the city was ready to take its place next to other rapidly growing cities in the new Dixie (Germany, 2007). A large domed multipurpose stadium along with a new NFL franchise was thought to enhance the city's image as "big league" (Germany, 2007). The citizens of Louisiana enthusiastically agreed with the idea. In 1966, Louisiana voters passed legislation to allow New Orleans to commence construction on the Superdome by the largest margin in the history of the state ("Historical Timeline," n.d.). Despite the enthusiasm that accompanies a new stadium and a new NFL franchise, obstacles remained. Among them were the unrealistic cost estimates, timeframe to complete the project, and location (Haas, 2014). Shortly after the voter approval, Schiro was provided an estimated cost of \$35 million to build the stadium, yet a memo he received in 1968 suggested that the cost would be more than twice that amount (Haas, 2014). Also, Dixon proclaimed that the dome would be completed in 1969, just three years from the date the voter initiative passed. However, as word spread that the stadium could cost over \$100 million and construction still had not begun on the stadium in 1968, accusations of fraud and deception were lobbed at Schiro and Dixon (Haas, 2014). The push to build the stadium downtown was met with significant resistance from those who wanted to move it to the lakefront in New Orleans' suburbs. A stadium with more space would provide greater parking, easier highway access, and at a lower cost. However, the allure of having a stadium downtown near the French Quarter, hotels, and restaurants was an opportunity to create a premier tourism experience unlike anything else in the United States (Haas, 2014). Despite the obstacles and the years of posturing, the Superdome broke ground in downtown New Orleans on August 12th, 1971 ("Historical timeline," n.d.). As the Superdome quickly approaches its 50th anniversary,

McKeithan, Schiro, and Dixon could not have possibly envisioned the multifaceted roles and impact the Superdome would play for the city of New Orleans in the decades to come.

### **Literature Review**

A major league sport facility, accompanied by a major professional franchise, can provide a plethora of economic benefits to a city. Prior research regarding economic impact of sporting events and venues suggests additive economic drivers such as job creation, tax revenue generation, infrastructure development, and new business investments (Crompton, 2006; Njoroge et al., 2017; Perić, 2018; Tomino et al., 2020). Whether those benefits supersede the cost of building such a facility to provide a sufficient economic return on investment continues to be challenged (Abbiasov & Sedov, 2023; Bradbury et al., 2023). Indirect effects such as leakages from the local economy, increased cost of living, inflationary pressures, resource consumption should also be considered before utilizing public funds to build a sport venue or host an event (Emery, 2002; Njoroge et al., 2017; Tzoumaka et al., 2022). However, limiting such notions of benefits to economic outputs provides a limited perspective of the overall impact. Spillover benefits, such as increased community visibility, improving a community's image, enhancing localized development, and psychic income have also been considered as alternatives to direct economic impact (Al-Emadi et al., 2022; Crompton, 2004).

Another consideration outside of economic output is a sport facility serving as a social anchor to the community (Seifried & Clopton, 2013). Social anchors incorporate social capital development by providing a point of connection for community members while also fostering a sense of unique group identity (Clopton & Finch, 2011). Sport venues provide both a social and physical institution for which the communities build a social identity (Newman & Giardina, 2008). For context, look no further than a fall Saturday on a college campus. Bradford & Sherry (2018) describe the environment around a university football stadium to be a community-building exercise that encapsulates American culture. Utilizing Clopton and Finch's (2011) social anchoring model, a true social anchor must bond and bridge social capital while also building collective identity for the community. Bonding social capital is built on trust and shared identity and often is tied to providing people a safety net in times of need. Whereas, bridging social capital refers to connecting people across various social and cultural communities to foster a place of belonging (Putnam, 2000).

This study aims to examine the unique financial, cultural, and social phenomenon of the Caesars Superdome through the lens of economic impact and social anchoring. While prior research has attempted to capture the socioeconomic outcomes of building and refurbishing the venue, this study was designed to synthesize those previous studies to provide broader context. Ultimately, this study seeks to determine the measurable economic and intangible benefits of the Caesars Superdome on the city of New Orleans and the Gulf South region.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative synthesis of economic studies, media articles, and academic journal articles was used to complete this study. A comprehensive search was conducted using reputable scholarly databases and search engines, including Google, Google Scholar, Newspaper Source Plus, and SPORTDiscus. Employing a systematic search strategy to identify relevant literature, the authors used the following keywords: "New Orleans," "economic impact," "Superdome." Usage of Boolean operators "OR" and "AND" were utilized in refining the search. The searches were designed to capture a diverse selection of articles pertinent to the economic and intangible benefits of the Superdome in the Gulf South region. Inclusion criteria to determine article eligibility included publication dates from 1960 to present, reputable

peer reviewed studies or news outlets, and information related to the economic or societal impact of the Superdome.

The search strategy yielded initial results of 113 articles. Following an elimination of duplicates and meticulous screening based upon subject relevance inclusion criteria, 13 articles were identified as suitable for this study. Those articles can be found in Table 1, which provides a summary of their contents.

**Table 1**

*Summary of selected articles pertinent to this study*

Reference	Title	Article Type	Conclusions
Baade & Matheson, 2012	Professional Sports, Hurricane Katrina, and the Economic Redevelopment of New Orleans	Economic impact study	Capital expenditures refurbishing and upgrading the Superdome in the face of massive need for capital expenditures elsewhere were ill-advised
Barton, 2025	After Hurricane Katrina, the Superdome was a 'symbol of misery and suffering.' 5 years later, it was the home of the champs	News article	Despite the tragedies that occurred in and around the Superdome during Katrina, it served as a symbol of rebirth for the city
Burns, 2014	When the Saints Went Marching In: Social Identity in the World Champion New Orleans Saints Football Team and Its Impact on Their Host City	Post hoc content analysis	Associated positive self-image of Saints fans and the success of the team
Chighizola, 2012	Where the Good Times Roll: New Orleans as a Destination for Sports Events Tourism	Qualitative case study	City officials cited infrastructure, city authenticity, economic impact, and entertainment as key components to attract events to New Orleans

Duncan, 2018	The NFL got it right: New Orleans is the best Super Bowl city in the world.	News article	Highlights the various attributes that make New Orleans a perfect host city for the Super Bowl
Higgins, 2009	A House Divided: The Evolution of the Louisiana Superdome from a Divisive Concept into a Symbol of New Orleans and the Surrounding Areas	Narrative case study	While financial benefits of the Superdome may be in question, the value to the city as a center point to the community makes it indispensable
Gerth, 1978	Superdome a Bottomless Pit for Taxpayer Funds	News article	Superdome's initial public investment and operations mistakes
Louis, 2009	Reclaiming a Citizenship Site: Performing New Orleans in the Superdome	Narrative case study	The reclamation of the Superdome post-Katrina as a citizenship symbol that defines the city
Matheson & Baade, 2006a	Can New Orleans Play Its Way Past Katrina?	Qualitative review	
Noll & Zimbalist, 1997	Sports, Jobs & Taxes: Are New Stadiums Worth the Cost?	Edited book	Public financing of sports facilities is a poor use of public funds
Matheson et al., 2018	Professional Sports, Hurricane Katrina, and the Economic Redevelopment of New Orleans: Revisited	Economic impact study	Symbolic reconstruction investments in sport facilities were misguided in response to Katrina
Ragas et al., 1987	Louisiana Superdome: Public Costs & Benefits	Quantitative economic impact study	Superdome produces significant direct effect economic impact
Rose, 2006	Saints in Superdome signals New Orleans' return.	News article	Outlines efforts that resulted in the return of the Superdome and its impact on the city

## Results

In 1985, researchers in tourism, marketing, real estate, and public finance from the University of New Orleans studied the costs and benefits with the Louisiana Superdome for the first ten years of operations (Ragas et al., 1987). Ragas et al. (1987) stated that the most important tenant of the Superdome is the National Football League's (NFL's) New Orleans Saints. The Saints was organized as an expansion team for the NFL following the public commitment by the state government to build a new stadium to house the team (Ragas et al., 1987). Without the construction of the Superdome, New Orleans would not have acquired the Saints from the NFL (Ragas et al., 1987). The Superdome charges rent to the New Orleans Saints a fee of \$25,000 a home game, or 5 percent of gross ticket receipts, with a yearly cap of \$800,000 (Noll & Zimbalist, 1997). The team receives 100 percent of the signage, suite, parking revenues, and 42 percent of gross concessions receipts (Noll & Zimbalist, 1997). The economic impact of the Saints was considered part of the Superdome impact on the region of south Louisiana (Ragas et al., 1987). From the time period of 1975 to 1984, the overall economic impact of the Superdome, included the calculation of out-of-town patrons to Saints games, local purchases, wages of the two vendors responsible for stadium operations and food service, and the resulting impact of Saints on the local economics of the greater New Orleans metropolitan area (Ragas et al., 1987).

The annual economic impact was assumed to vary with the number of events in 1983. The mathematical model for estimating dollar expenditures per event per year for that year was (Ragas et al., 1987):

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Estimated Dollar Volume in Year } X \\ &= \frac{\text{Event Attendance for } X \text{ Year}}{\text{Event Attendance Category 1983}} \times \text{1983 Dollar Volume for Event Type} \\ & \times \frac{X \text{ Year CPI}}{1983 \text{ CPI}} \end{aligned}$$

The total direct economic impact from stadium operations was estimated to \$934.28 million during the first ten years of operations of the stadium from 1975 to 1984 (Ragas et al., 1987). Operations, real estate, and taxes were the main generators of economic impact (Ragas et al., 1987). This does not involve any indirect multiplier effects for the state or local income. The study did not include any local events like proms, boat shows, or discos. For events that included locals and out of town patrons, economic impact calculations only included out of town attendance figures. Real estate impacts totaled \$149 million, which was comprised of cost savings resulting from the substitution of public for private parking facilities on site, and appreciation of the land value where the Superdome sits in downtown New Orleans. Tax revenues accounted for \$115.95 million of revenue generation coming from municipal tax revenues at \$50.08 million, and state tax revenues at \$65.87 million (Ragas et al., 1987). This was compounded by the Superdome losing \$13 million dollars for the 1977 fiscal year (Higgins, 2009; Gerth, 1978). Despite this economic loss, the Superdome hosted two Super Bowls in 1978 and 1981, which contributed \$130.83 millions of that total \$934.28 millions of economic impact (Ragas et al., 1987). Other sporting events, that was not the Saints, included the Sugar Bowl, Tulane University football, concerts, and boxing matches. This stadium also hosted the Final Four in 1982 in this first ten-year period. The \$100 million annual operating impact is indeed ample in terms of economic maturity for a region constituting of 1.2 million people with less than \$10 billion in annual household incomes (Ragas et al., 1987). The Saints, two Super Bowls, Tulane University football, a Muhammad Ali fight, and a Final Four accounted for the bulk of this economic impact during the first ten years of operation.

### Discussion on Policy Implications

Sport economists can argue for the fiscal benefits of investing in stadia for cities. Sociologists, like D. Stanley Eitzen (2016), argue that sport is for good of all the community. Pope Francis wrote that, "may

sport always promote the culture of encounter” (Eitzen, 2016, p. 23). For more than 50 years, the Superdome has allowed multitudes of people to enjoy moments in people’s collective lives including Tulane University graduations, the Rolling Stones and Taylor Swift concerts, the Saints and 2009 Super Bowl run, National Championships in college football, Lutheran prayer gatherings and many other events. These events have added to the social capital of the area and are ingrained in collective memory. Collective memory represents the vast influential events in history that a populace will remember and is defined as the “the collection of memories shared by a common culture” (Company, 2004 & Smith, 2016). The collective memory of the people of the Gulf South Region includes this wonderful multipurpose facility at 1500 Sugar Bowl Drive with an added bonus of being “a small part of history” for the event staff of the stadium like Ms. Edwina Handsome, control room operator of over 36 years for Legends Global, formerly SMG World.

As a collective identity, the Superdome can be seen as a symbol of celebration, fandom, refuge and rebirth. The social connections made within its walls and because of its presence (bridging social capital), the physical and social resiliency in the face of tragedy (bonding social capital), and the identity cultivated within the community (building collective identity), exemplifies Clopton and Finch’s (2011) three pillars necessary for a true social anchor for the city of New Orleans. However, none of this would be possible without the financial investments necessary to construct, renovate, and maintain the facility over the past 50 years. Additionally, the financial commitments dedicated to the Superdome are partially predicated on the economic impact it derives by hosting some of the largest sporting events in the world. While its economic return on investment may not be fully appreciated, the value derived from its status as one of the community’s strongest social anchors cannot be overstated.

## **Discussion**

The Superdome is a physical institution within the city of New Orleans that offers an open platform for a heterogeneous collection of residents to interact in an informal setting. The social engagement among tens of thousands of fans attending Saints’ games or attending a Taylor Swift concert simply cannot be replicated anywhere else in the city. As a decades-long fixture of the city of New Orleans and the Gulf South region, our findings confirm its status as a social anchor by displaying bridged and bonded social capital, along with the Superdome’s ability to build collective identity. Through bridging social capital, the Superdome functions as a “communal endeavor” of sports fandom by building social networks that transcend socioeconomic, social, racial, or political division. Whether the city is united by the success of the Saints or as a welcoming host to a multitude of mega events (e.g., Super Bowl, Final Four, NBA All Star Games, Papal Visits), the Superdome serves as the hub for building relationships and networks within the community and for external audiences. While social anchoring primarily focuses on the local community, the allure for visitors to be immersed in the unique culture within the community is why New Orleans is considered one of the best hosts for mega-events in the United States (Duncan, 2018). Unfortunately, its role changed drastically in the summer of 2005.

Hurricane Katrina was a storm of unprecedented ferocity causing the largest damage in real dollar terms of any hurricane in U.S. History, with property losses ranging from \$70 to \$125 billion (Baade et al., 2007; Wildasin, 2006). With a final death toll of over 1400 people, Katrina is among one of the worst national disasters ever suffered in the United States (Baade et al., 2007). With total losses over \$100 billion, Katrina was far worse than past hurricanes, or the effects of Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. The Superdome provided a shelter of last resort for Katrina and other hurricanes for the general public in the past. Despite the substantial physical, economic, and emotional damage to the city and region, the Superdome’s recovery served as a symbol of resilience in the face of tragedy (Louis, 2009). Bonding



social capital requires a shared identity and a collective trust within a tight-knit community to help others “get by” in times of struggle (Putnam, 2000). Post-Katrina, the speed in which the Superdome was repaired and the Saints returned to New Orleans gave people hope. In response to the Saints first home game since Katrina, former New Orleans’ mayor, Mitch Landrieu commented on its impact.

When the Saints came back into that building, and we all saw each other for the first time in a long time, and we had the glorious Saints Day, that’s the moment when we knew we were going to survive, he says. It was a big moment for us, and people in New Orleans remember that very moment, and the Saints gave us that (as cited in Barton, 2025, para. 29).

Following Hurricane Katrina, the Superdome had a massive renovation, with the help from FEMA, and was ready for football again in September 2006 (Chighizola, 2012). The city of New Orleans was able to rebound after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina with the New Orleans Saints returning to play in a memorable game versus the Atlanta Falcons in September 2006 and then hosting the NBA All Star game in 2008 (Chighizola, 2012). The resilience shown by the community in the recovery after Katrina, highlights the strength of bonding social capital by serving as an emotional safety net during the crisis. “The Superdome is a cause for celebration. The Superdome is the most visible building on our city’s skyline. Its durability is our durability” (Rose, 2006).

The Superdome also allows the New Orleans’ community to rally around its teams and events as a collective identity subgroup of the population. The record-setting approval of the citizens of Louisiana for the construction of the Superdome in 1966 is a perfect encapsulation of the passion and excitement that the community demonstrated as sports fans (“Historical timeline”, n.d.). More specifically, their collective identity as fans of the NFL franchise that eventually became the New Orleans Saints. The Saints even don the logo and colors representative of the city, as the fleur-de-lis represents the French culture found within the community and the colors represent Mardi Gras (gold) and oil (black) (Del Rio, 2012). As further evidence of collective identity, Burns (2014) confirms the positive associations fans had with the Saints during their Super Bowl victory in 2009:

The intangible benefits commonly referenced are the unity among fans in the “Who Dat Nation” and the ecstatic joy experienced by the citizens of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region, examples of accentuating similarities within the in-group, as well as the corresponding good feelings about the city and the region and the positive impression it may create in the rest of the viewing public around the country, and the world, as a result of the positive media coverage of the 2009 season, both examples of positive self-perception of the in-group (p. 159).

### ***Limitations***

The study by Ragas et al. (1987) did not account for local patrons for the main clients- the New Orleans Saints and Tulane Green Wave football teams. The economic impact study relied heavily on out-of-town patrons and did not count the locals who come every week for college and or professional football events. A third of the economic impact of this building was not accounted for with non-sporting and local events according to Ragas et al. (1987). According to Doug Thornton, President of North American Venues of Legends Global / Caesar’s Superdome, the biggest challenge in this sport tourism industry affecting New Orleans is the fiscal resources, for New Orleans is not a wealthy city like New York, Dallas, Atlanta, or Chicago (Chighizola, 2012). New Orleans must continue to stay competitive with cities with much newer stadia. Despite being a small city, New Orleans ranked fifth in the number of conventions hosted in the United States, prior to Hurricane Katrina (Matheson & Baade, 2006a; Tennessean News Services, 2005).



## **Conclusion**

The review above reveals that the Caesar's Superdome has had certain challenges in the first ten years of operation and in years following, since opening its doors in 1975. It is very relevant to mention hurricanes and Super Bowls for both had dramatic economic stimuli or negative impact on financial status of this world class venue (Chighizola, 2012; Higgins, 2009; Ragas et al., 1987). Like all econometric studies, degrees of uncertainty of true economic impact of major events on host cities remain (Matheson & Baade, 2006b). What is certain, is this world class multipurpose facility has had a positive economic and social impact to the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans (Higgins, 2009).

To conclude, there are notable benefits of studying the economic impact of the Superdome, for this multipurpose facility generated a total estimated direct economic impact of \$934.28 million during the first ten years of operations (Ragas et al., 1987). That value is equal to more than \$2.9 billion in 2025 dollars. According to Higgins (2009), the Superdome had become the venue that saved New Orleans from falling into fiscal despondency, similar to Detroit, for this building has become a symbol of the resurgence of New Orleans post Katrina and post Covid. Econometric studies on fiscal impact of sport mega events (SMEs) are highly debated by scholars, and the debate remains on the true collective economic impact (Matheson & Baade, 2004; Matheson, 2009). Economists argue that hosting big events like the Super Bowl, Final Four, WrestleMania, and NBA All Star Game can be either proverbial air balls or slam dunks (Matheson & Baade, 2004). Moreover, sport tourism studies have only recently begun to emphasize sports event tourism (Chighizola, 2012). Mr. Doug Thornton would argue that these events have been economic slam dunks for one to thirteen economic returns are indeed robust and worth the time and energy (Ragas et al., 1987):

The only world-class events that we haven't hosted are the World Cup and the Olympics. Super Bowl, probably the biggest single event in the world; Final Four, biggest collegiate event in the country; BCS Championship, largest single college event in the country; Republican National Convention, 1988; Papal Visit, 1986; largest event ever for an indoor concert in 1981 where we had a 91,000 people here with the Rolling Stones, so we've done quite a few things here (Chighizola, 2012, p.64).

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