

Why USF is confident that it's time to move forward with on-campus football stadium plans

By Amr Abdalla
December 5, 2023

At first glance, having a new eye-popping stadium in town for your college football team may sound like a sure-fire win for everyone. Players get a place to call their own, students don't have to commute to catch a game, and the university gets to create a stronger sense of community on campus.

The reality of the situation, however, is never that simple. There is a reason the University of South Florida took so long to commit to the idea of an on-campus stadium. There is a reason why for so many years, making the approximately [30-minute drive](#) from USF's Tampa campus to Raymond James Stadium seemed like the best possible scenario for the USF Football program.

While the reality of the challenges associated with building an on-campus stadium must be discussed, South Florida's confidence in it finally being the right time to move forward with this plan certainly can't be overlooked. USF President Rhea Law emphasized this feeling at a Board of Trustees [meeting](#) this past summer.

"This is a transformational project that will provide a shared campus experience that contributes to the culture, spirit, and connectedness of this university," Law said about the stadium.

The university has already finalized most of the details for the stadium, with construction expected to be completed in time for the 2026 football season. According to the [Project Summary](#) file received from the Florida Board of Governors, the stadium will be located in the USF Athletics District, south of USF Holly Drive on the Sycamore Recreation Fields.

The Project Summary file reveals that the project involves the construction of a 35,000-seat stadium featuring five different levels. The stadium is expected to include a field level, main concourse, club level, suite level, and press level. The BOG stated in their summary that USF plans for the stadium to be used to host both football and women's lacrosse events. The file also vaguely describes the design of the exterior, saying that it will fit the aesthetic of the campus and athletic district.

These plans certainly aren't coming cheap, with the BOG reporting that the project is estimated to cost \$340M. Certain USF faculty members have voiced concerns about this price in the past. During discussions between the Board of Trustees, USF Trustee Jasinski Schneider said on behalf of the faculty that there were serious doubts about the financing of the stadium. As relayed in the [meeting minutes](#) file, faculty members believed that there were funds that would be diverted from other areas, initiatives, and sources from the university.

In that same meeting, Vice Chair Mike Griffin ensured the members that USF had the right financing plan in place to benefit everyone.

According to the meeting minutes, Griffin commented that the university is taking a “conservative approach” to managing the debt and other financial issues concerning the stadium. Public records showing USF’s stadium-financing plans seem to support that notion.

According to The Florida Board of Governors’ [Estimated Sources and Uses of Funds](#) public records file, The USF Financing Corporation issued a 20-year, fixed-rate, taxable debt of \$200M with an interest rate of 5.50% to cover a significant portion of the stadium’s cost. USF is also paying for the project using money received from other avenues, such as \$50M from a USF Foundation cash advance, \$31M from student capital improvement fees, \$11.5M from auxiliaries, \$15M from the administrative overhead, \$8M from 2017 Broadband Spectrum sale proceeds, and \$25M from cash contributions, contingent on EBS license sales. USF’s calculated strategy for funding the stadium seems to signal a readiness from the university that wasn’t present in the past.

The BOG’s Project Summary file indicates that this readiness to move forward with the project can be credited to a [Market & Financial Feasibility study](#) prepared for USF in 2017 and updated in December 2021 by Conventions, Sports & Leisure International. The study highlighted numerous statistics showcasing just how impactful a new stadium would be for South Florida’s football program.

While one could go on and on reading all of the points made in the 171-page study, it only takes highlighting some of the most prominent statistics from it to understand why USF was convinced.

One of those examples from the study was the data collected regarding people’s opinions toward building a new stadium. In the study, 78% of occasional ticket buyers said that a new on-campus stadium would make them attend more games, 70% of non-ticket-buying alumni said the same thing, while 58% of faculty, 48% of season ticket holders, and 34% of Bull Club donors also shared the same sentiment.

Another crucial point mentioned in the study was the fact that USF’s athletic budget of \$48.4M was 7% lower than the AAC average. The study emphasized that a new on-campus stadium could have an immediate impact on generating much-needed revenue for the program.

This plan for generating income is nothing new. According to data retrieved from [athleticscholarships.net](#), only three out of the 20 most profitable college football programs in the nation do not have an on-campus football stadium. One of those three programs, Texas, makes up for not having a stadium by owning its own Network for broadcasting games, a luxury that most other programs cannot rely on for money.

A third statistic from the study focused on the fact that USF playing in an NFL stadium gives them the second-lowest fill rate for any AAC team at 48%. In comparison, the league average was 66%. The study emphasizes that this is not a problem related to a lack of attendance at

games. In 2017, USF averaged approximately 31,400 attendees per game, ranking 6th among AAC peers and 10% higher than the league average. Playing in a significantly larger stadium than necessary, however, creates a negative outlook on the football program and discourages fans from getting involved.

In an interview that I conducted with former USF star linebacker Dwayne Boyles, he agreed with the data's argument that a new stadium would have a significant impact on the program.

"Having an on-campus stadium will for sure bring more students to football games," Boyles said. "I feel that's the most important part of having one. It'll also bring a sense of school spirit that [Raymond James Stadium] doesn't bring."

Boyles went on to point out something that even the study itself didn't mention in its attempt to sell USF on the stadium. He talked about the sense of inferiority that's created when a team is forced to play in a stadium that doesn't belong to them.

"[Having an on-campus stadium] will give the football team a place to call home instead of feeling like it's sharing a home with its big brother," Boyles said.

The "big brother" that Boyles was referring to is of course the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Whether you're attending Raymond James Stadium for a USF game or a Bucs game, the stadium always keeps its Buccaneers emblems and banners up. That, alongside the bright-red seats and unmissable [103-foot-long pirate ship](#), makes Raymond James feel like a Buccaneers gameday even on days when it is the Bulls who are in action.

USF evidently feels like it's time to raise the standards for its athletic department in all facets. After a summer of reshaping its football program with the hiring of coach Alex Golesh along with the recruiting of new players, the university is ready to give the program a new home to emphasize that upward trajectory.

In Golesh's first season as USF Football's head coach, the program has already matched its [win total](#) from the past three seasons under Jeff Scott.

"I continue to be really proud of the foundation that we're laying here," Golesh [said](#) after USF's most recent win against Temple. "We're going to continue to build on what we've got and the momentum that we have."

The construction of the on-campus stadium will be just another step in USF becoming a respectable and formidable sports school. With South Florida coming up with plans for the financing, location, and design, among the many other aspects of the on-campus stadium, it's apparent that USF is as prepared as it's ever been to move forward with this project.