WHO CONTROLS THE FIELD CONTROLS THE FUTURE

A Comparative Case Study of Facility Ownership, Community Control, and the Sustainability of Local Little League Programs

Updated Executive Summary
Oklahoma - Washington - National Comparative Research

Research Framework
Integrity of the Game vs. Economic Impact (Politics): The Oklahoma Business Plan

Updated proposition: Community youth organizations need durable control of their facilities. Fee-simple nonprofit ownership provides the strongest protection, while a transparent, long-term public-private stewardship agreement can provide a viable alternative when land ownership is impractical.

Updated to incorporate Northshore Athletic Fields and the independent nonprofit community-stewardship model.

Executive Summary

This case study examines a fundamental question in community youth sports: Can a local nonprofit youth-sports organization truly control its mission, future, finances, scheduling, and community priorities when it does not control the facility on which it operates?

The updated research supports a more precise proposition: facility control is one of the most consequential variables in the long-term sustainability of community-based youth sports. Fee-simple ownership provides the strongest form of control, but ownership is not the only model capable of protecting a community mission. A sufficiently long, transparent, mission-protected agreement can provide meaningful continuity when the public retains title to the land.

Northshore Athletic Fields materially strengthens this conclusion. King County records show that the county owns the Northshore Athletic Fields property and authorized a 30-year use agreement with Northshore Athletic Fields (NAF) for the development, operation, maintenance, and use of the athletic complex. The agreement places long-term operational responsibility with a nonprofit while preserving public ownership of the underlying asset.

The core policy issue is not simply who owns the dirt. It is who has durable, accountable, mission-protected control over scheduling, operations, revenue, improvements, and the future of the youth program.

The Oklahoma Question

The broader Hidden Valley - Integrity of the Game research documents an Oklahoma youth-sports environment in which publicly supported, tribal, educational, or institutionally owned facilities may be operated through nonprofit user groups, associations, private tournament operators, individual directors, contractors, or other intermediaries. Ownership of the physical asset, control of the calendar, collection of entry fees, concessions, gate revenue, and responsibility for capital costs can therefore be divided among different parties.

The Arkansas comparison and the Washington facility models now allow the research to separate four variables that are often treated as if they were the same: property ownership, operational control, financial control, and mission accountability.

Four Facility-Control Models

The addition of Northshore Athletic Fields expands the original three-model framework into four distinct governance structures.

Model	Underlying Owner	Operating Control	Research Example
1. Nonprofit ownership	Youth nonprofit	Youth nonprofit	South Kitsap Southern Little League
2. Single-league protected public lease	Government	Local youth league by contract	North Kitsap Little League / Snider Park
3. Independent nonprofit stewardship	Government	Community facility nonprofit	Northshore Athletic Fields
4. Discretionary / intermediary public-facility model	Government / institution	Operator, user group, contractor, or changing leaseholder	Oklahoma case under study

NONPROFIT OWNERSHIP

South Kitsap Southern Little League

South Kitsap remains the clearest ownership example in the study. The league publicly states that it owns its fields and is responsible for their care and upkeep. The research question is whether ownership keeps the burdens and benefits of operating the complex aligned inside the same accountable nonprofit institution.

SINGLE-LEAGUE CONTRACTUAL CONTROL

North Kitsap Little League

North Kitsap provides a different comparison. Current public evidence identifies Snider Park as county-owned property subject to a lease arrangement for Little League operations. This model tests whether a strong single-league agreement can provide enough security to plan, improve, and operate a facility across generations.

INDEPENDENT NONPROFIT COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP

Northshore Athletic Fields

Northshore adds a third Washington model. King County owns the property, while Northshore Athletic Fields - a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization - operates under a 30-year use agreement to develop, operate, maintain, and use the athletic complex as a public recreational facility. NAF's board is composed of volunteer representatives from member Little Leagues and at-large directors, directly connecting facility governance to community youth organizations.

Why Northshore Is Especially Important

Northshore demonstrates that public ownership and community control are not mutually exclusive. King County's 2014 ordinance states that public-recreation policy can empower user groups, sports associations, and community organizations to operate, maintain, and implement capital improvements on county land. That concept is highly relevant to Oklahoma because it offers a practical middle path between direct municipal operation and private tournament entrepreneurship.

The Northshore model also changes the reform question. Instead of asking only whether a local Little League can afford to purchase a multimillion-dollar complex, policymakers can ask whether public ownership can be paired with long-term nonprofit stewardship, representative governance, transparent finances, protected youth access, and clear responsibility for operations and capital improvements.

Source note: King County Ordinance 17739 (2014); King County Ordinance 19459 / First Amendment (2022); Northshore Athletic Fields public website.

Oklahoma Comparative Cases

The Washington models become most useful when compared with Oklahoma situations in which ownership, operations, contracts, and program mission can be separated.

Tulsa County / Tulsa Little League Baseball

The Tulsa County dispute illustrates how ownership, leaseholding, and program operations can become contested when they are divided among different entities. The case study does not declare wrongdoing or prejudge pending litigation. It uses the dispute to demonstrate the institutional risk that arises when a youth program's continued access depends on contracts, governmental decisions, litigation, and relationships beyond the program's direct control.

BCM Sports / Bouse Sports Complex

The BCM Sports experience illustrates the difference between producing programming at a facility and controlling the facility. Existing research addresses concession rights, gate control, operating authority, and scheduling stability. The broader lesson is that a nonprofit can create demand, relationships, programming, and operational knowledge while remaining vulnerable to future contracting decisions by the property owner.

Brian Crawford Memorial Sports Complex

This facility raises a different governance question: if a nonprofit contributes charitable fundraising, identity, goodwill, volunteer effort, and community support to creation of a complex it does not own or legally control, what protections survive when institutional priorities later change? Contribution is not the same thing as ownership or durable operating authority.

FireLake Ball Fields - Anonymous Governance Case

A January 2026 research discussion with a senior Citizen Potawatomi Nation leadership representative is retained as an anonymous governance source. The discussion explored infrastructure costs, tournament directors, entry fees, gate receipts, concessions, officials, maintenance, utilities, capital replacement, and the economic value generated by events. The source remains intentionally unnamed because the purpose is to study facility architecture rather than profile an individual.

The Community Asset Problem

Sweat Equity Without Property Equity

Youth organizations routinely contribute volunteer labor, equipment, field improvements, fundraising, maintenance, customer relationships, tournament reputation, and community goodwill to facilities they do not own. Those efforts can substantially improve the value and usefulness of the physical asset. Yet volunteer service does not automatically create a property right, and years of community investment do not necessarily guarantee future access.

This produces what the case study identifies as sweat equity without property equity: the nonprofit may create long-term value, but the durable value remains attached to land or improvements controlled by another institution.

The Northshore Alternative

Northshore shows that this problem can be addressed even when public ownership is retained. A long-term use agreement can place operating, maintenance, and development responsibility with a nonprofit organization whose governance includes representatives of the youth leagues using the facility. The key is that the agreement must be long enough and specific enough to justify capital planning, fundraising, maintenance responsibility, and organizational continuity.

King County's original relationship with Northshore Little League dates back to 1981, when the county entered a 35-year agreement allowing the league to develop, operate, and maintain fields on the property. In 2014, the county authorized a new 30-year use agreement with Northshore Athletic Fields, demonstrating a multi-decade public policy commitment to community-based operational stewardship.

Arkansas Comparison - Economic Impact Is Not Facility ROI

The Arkansas comparative research separates regional economic impact from public-facility return on investment. Traveling families can create hotel, restaurant, fuel, grocery, entertainment, and retail spending, but those expenditures are not the same measurement as the return received by the sports complex itself. Northshore adds another dimension: the governance system can be designed so that the organization responsible for the fields is directly connected to the community programs using them, rather than relying solely on outside tournament throughput.

From Facility User to Community Asset Steward

The Ownership Advantage

When an accountable nonprofit owns its complex, the organization's mission and the physical asset can be aligned. Registration revenue can support programming. Concessions and sponsorships can support operations. Tournament revenue can subsidize local recreation. Donations can become capital improvements. Volunteer labor can improve an asset that remains under nonprofit stewardship. Long-term improvements can be planned over decades rather than contract cycles.

The Stewardship Alternative

Northshore demonstrates a second pathway: public ownership combined with durable nonprofit stewardship. This can preserve the public character of the land while placing day-to-day responsibility, community representation, field development, and maintenance within an independent nonprofit structure. For many Oklahoma communities, this may be more achievable than transferring fee-simple ownership of an existing municipal complex.

Proposed Oklahoma Reform Framework

1. Prefer fee-simple nonprofit ownership when economically and legally feasible.

2. When public ownership is retained, use long-term agreements measured in decades rather than short discretionary cycles.

3. Place operational control with an independent nonprofit whose board meaningfully represents community youth programs and includes appropriate at-large expertise.

4. Protect scheduling priority, concession rights, field-rental authority, tournament agreements, capital improvements, maintenance duties, and renewal procedures in writing.

5. Require transparent annual financial reporting, conflict-of-interest rules, major-contract disclosure, and capital-reserve planning.

6. Keep individual tournament entrepreneurs, contractors, or sanctioning relationships from becoming the de facto gatekeepers of the public asset.

7. Use tournament activity as a tool to support the facility and local youth mission - not as the reason the community program exists.

8. Measure success by affordability, participation, facility condition, community access, financial sustainability, youth development, and long-term stewardship.

The Northshore Research Questions

The next phase should obtain and analyze the complete King County-NAF use agreement and amendments, NAF bylaws, Form 990s, capital-improvement history, insurance requirements, field-rental policy, concession and gate provisions, audit requirements, termination rights, renewal language, ownership of improvements, and dissolution provisions. Those records can determine how much of Northshore's practical success comes from the length of the agreement, board structure, financial architecture, or the relationship with King County.

Research Conclusion

Oklahoma has demonstrated that it can build sports facilities. The deeper question is what institutional structure gives children and community organizations the greatest likelihood that those facilities will remain aligned with a local youth mission twenty, thirty, or fifty years later.

An organization that owns its facility can still fail. An organization operating on public property can still succeed. Ownership is not a guarantee of good governance, and public ownership is not proof of bad governance.

The addition of Northshore Athletic Fields strengthens the central conclusion: control matters, but control can be created through more than one legal structure. South Kitsap demonstrates nonprofit ownership. North Kitsap demonstrates a single-league public lease. Northshore demonstrates independent nonprofit community stewardship on public land. Oklahoma cases demonstrate the vulnerabilities that can arise when ownership, operations, revenue, and youth mission are fragmented.

The policy recommendation is therefore broader and more practical than 'every league must buy land.' Oklahoma should develop pathways for accountable youth nonprofits to become long-term stewards - and, where feasible, owners - of community youth-sports assets. The public can retain land ownership while still protecting community control, provided the operating agreement is durable, transparent, representative, financially accountable, and insulated from temporary private interests.

From a weekend question to a generational question:

Not simply: Who gets this weekend?

But: Who will protect this place for the next generation?

Principal Northshore sources used in this update: King County Ordinance 17739 (30-year use agreement); King County Ordinance 19459 / 2022 First Amendment; Northshore Athletic Fields public website.