

No Cactus League this spring? An MLB lockout could cost Arizona nearly \$500M

ASU economist Anthony Evans explains how a lost 2027 spring-training season could hit hotels, restaurants, workers and local tax revenues — and what communities can do to prepare

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
September 25, 2026

Story highlights

The 2027 spring-training season, a cherished Arizona tradition and a powerful economic engine, could be in jeopardy due to a potential MLB lockout.

Based on 2026 attendance, Arizona could stand to lose nearly \$500 million in state GDP.

ASU economist Anthony Evans suggests restaurants, hotels, retailers, transportation providers and concessionaires prepare lockout-adjusted operating plans.

Every spring, Major League Baseball transforms metro Phoenix.

Fans in team jerseys stream into 10 ballparks, restaurant patios fill up and hotels welcome visitors escaping colder parts of the country. But the Cactus League is more than a cherished Arizona tradition: It is a powerful economic engine, and the 2027 season could be in jeopardy.

The MLB's current labor agreement expires Dec. 1, and several media outlets are reporting the current talks are contentious. If owners and players fail to reach a new deal, a lockout could delay or even cancel spring training.

The potential consequences are enormous. About 60% of Cactus League fans come from outside Arizona, according to studies conducted by the [L. William Seidman Research Institute](#) at Arizona State University's [W. P. Carey School of Business](#). Based on 2026 attendance, the loss of an entire season could mean roughly 1 million fewer visitors and as much as \$496 million in lost GDP for the state, with effects extending well beyond the ballparks.

In the following Q&A, [Anthony Evans](#), center director at the Seidman Research Institute, explains which industries would be most vulnerable, why the timing and duration of a lockout would determine the scale of the losses, and what local governments and businesses can do now to prepare for an uncertain 2027 spring-training season.

Question: If an MLB lockout cancels the 2027 Cactus League season, what would the immediate economic impact be on the Phoenix metropolitan area and Arizona?

Answer: Seidman has implemented several Cactus League studies over the last decade, all of which consistently suggest that approximately 60% of fans travel from outside the state to watch Cactus League games. Based on the 2026 total attendance of 1.75 million fans, that could equate to a loss of around 1 million visitors if the 2027 Cactus League does not happen at all, representing a total loss of up to \$495 million to state GDP.

However, that is a worst-case scenario. If only a partial loss of games occurs, the loss will be more difficult to quantify. That's because the distribution of attendees across the five or so weeks is not even. Out-of-state attendance is affected in part by the timing of each school district's spring break, which varies throughout the nation.

Q: Which industries and workers would be most vulnerable?

A: The main beneficiaries of the direct expenditure in 2026 were lodging and bars/restaurants. The table below summarizes the main beneficiaries of direct expenditures from visiting fans alone. There are additional expenditures by the MLB clubs and organizers not included within this table. The two biggest sources of expenditures contributing to the total state GDP impact in 2026 are also accommodation/lodging and bars and restaurants. Combined, they accounted for 68.2% of the estimated total state GDP impact in 2026.

Q: Could other tourism or entertainment activity offset some of those losses, or would most spring-training spending simply disappear from the Valley?

A: Economists frequently refer to the "crowding out effect." This is the theory that large events push away regular tourists, business travelers or locals who intentionally avoid the traffic and higher prices associated with each event, neutralizing at least some of the estimated economic gains. Other tourism or entertainment activity could then, in theory, offset some of those losses, but Arizona will struggle to offset the loss of a full Cactus League season.

The Cactus League's \$495 million contribution to state GDP in 2026 is only based on the visiting dollars spent in the metro Phoenix area. Around 1 in 5 of the visiting fans also travel to attractions in other parts of Arizona during their trip, thereby further increasing the infusion of new dollars into

the state economy. A 2024 National Park Service Report estimated that visitors to the Grand Canyon annually spend over \$905 million. Adjusting for differences in the value of the dollar in both studies, the total expenditure of visiting baseball fans in metro Phoenix over just five weeks in 2026 is equivalent to approximately 40% of the annual direct expenditures of visitors to the Grand Canyon. How can Arizona realistically offset a loss of that magnitude?

It's also important to acknowledge that the 10 ballparks used for spring training host a diverse range of sporting and non-sporting events at other times of the year, so the facilities will still generate value outside the Cactus League season. They will not remain unused for a year in the event of a full MLB lockout.

Q: Beyond the immediate financial losses, could a canceled season cause longer-term harm to Arizona's tourism industry, communities and relationships with MLB teams?

A: There have been four owner-imposed MLB lockouts since 1973, and five player strikes. One would hope that the financial losses associated with a partial or fully cancelled season would therefore only be short term. The key thing is for ballpark owners to continue working with the MLB teams to enhance the facilities available for players and fans alike. Arizona's biggest unique selling point — aside from the incredible weather — is the short commute between Cactus League ballparks. Travel times in the Grapefruit League, held in Florida, are much longer.

Q: What steps could local governments and businesses take now to prepare for a possible lockout and reduce its economic effects?

A: Cities cannot realistically replace an entire Cactus League on short notice; and the timing of any future agreement is impossible to predict. The marketing of a Cactus League season to out-of-state visitors also takes place months in advance. At best, each ballpark's host community will need to work closely with the Cactus League Association, the Arizona Office of Tourism and the Arizona Sports and Tourism Authority to:

Prepare common assumptions for a full season, shortened season and no-season scenario.

Issue a common, reliable source of public information on game status, refunds and alternative activities.

Coordinate marketing and event bookings so cities do not compete against one another or issue conflicting messages.

Remain neutral in the labor dispute; its role should be economic preparedness rather than advocacy for either side.

Restaurants, hotels, retailers, transportation providers and concessionaires should also probably prepare lockout-adjusted operating plans.

The most effective measures implemented by local governments and/or businesses will need to seek to preserve visitor trips, maintain business liquidity and ensure ballparks are capable of reopening quickly for MLB once an agreement is reached.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



A Padres player's mitt and bat are set on the ground during 2026 spring training. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Anthony Evans

Expenditure Type	Estimate (Millions \$)		Expenditure Type	Estimate (Millions \$)
Lodging/Accommodation	\$138.2		Groceries	\$14.7
Bars and Restaurants	\$109.8		Other Entertainment	\$13.6
Rental Cars	\$32.3		Gasoline	\$10.9
Game Tickets	\$29.8		Local Transportation	\$3.9
Souvenirs & Gifts	\$20.8		Total	\$374.0

Graphic courtesy Anthony Evans