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Bike race has eye on Columbia

Inaugural Tour of Missouri aims to attract world's best bicyclists

BY LINDSAY TOLER

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The closest most Columbia residents have gotten to the world's greatest bicyclists is tuning in to the annual broadcast of the Tour de France. But a soon-to-come decision from the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau could bring them right to the finish line.

The bureau will respond this week to Medalist Sports Inc., an international sports marketing company, about whether a leg of the inaugural Tour of Missouri, a statewide bicycle race, will run through Columbia.

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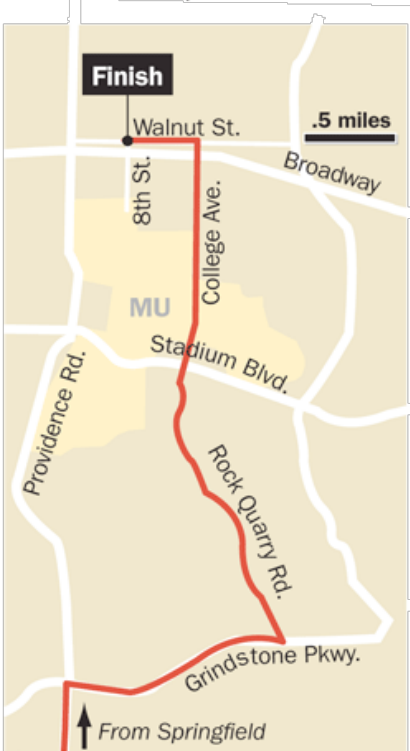
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A proposed route would include a stage that begins in Springfield and ends at the Courthouse Square in Columbia.



Source: Columbia Convention and Visitors Bureau

CHRISTINE CHAN/Missourian

To participate, the bureau must guarantee that it will raise \$30,000 by the tour's start in September.

"This is just so totally unlike anything we are doing," said Lorah Steiner, executive director of the bureau. "There is a desire to fund this event and make it happen."

The bureau will approach the City Council and city manager to ask for \$30,000 from their unreserved fund balance, which consist of money not allocated into the bureau's initial budget. It hopes to offset those funds through citizen fundraising efforts with local bicycling groups.

"I hope so," Steiner replied when asked whether that amount of money could be raised by local organizations.

The money would provide hotel rooms and two meals for the tour participants and their crews.

Initially, the bureau planned on funding the tour through its sports development fund. However, the tour does not meet its funding criteria because profits will be based on

advertising revenue sold during the anticipated high level of media coverage.

If the sports development fund were to be used, it would mean first altering the funding guidelines, a process Steiner called "unwieldy."

“Any change to the guidelines would need to be applied equally to all future applications,” Steiner said. Such a precedent could mean fundraising complications for future events.

The tour may not mean increased profits for hotels because the race would come through Columbia the Friday of the usually busy Mizzou Family Weekend.

The Holiday Inn Select has already pledged to hold 150 rooms at a discounted rate if Columbia chooses to participate in the tour.

Providing hotel rooms to the tour participants and their crews at a discounted rate could mean sacrificing charging a full rate to families coming in for the football game.

“Sometimes growth hurts at the beginning,” said Bob McDonald, advisory board member and general manager of the Courtyard Marriott.

However, what the city might lose in hotel revenue, it could make up for in press coverage and publicity. The tour, which is the first of its kind in Missouri and second of its kind in the nation, is expected to draw Olympic-quality cyclists from across the globe.

“(The Tour of Missouri) is an event that would be good for Columbia, especially for a broader future view of putting Columbia on the map,” McDonald said.

That level of publicity could mean turning Columbia into a destination city for future sporting events, Steiner said.

“When you’ve held something like this and you’ve shown that you can, that says something to the sports organizer who is looking for a site for their event,” Steiner said. “The caliber of our city is equal to the caliber of their event.”

Medalist Sports hopes to introduce the finalized route in early February. According to the Tour of Missouri proposal, the six-day race will cover about 600 miles, highlighting both rural and urban areas of Missouri. The tour is tentatively scheduled to begin in Kansas City and end in St. Louis. If Columbia participates, cyclists would race to Columbia from Springfield on Sept. 14.

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