

The clock is ticking for Super Bowl party planners

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It's crunch time for the party planners, club owners and committees hoping to transform metro Detroit into celebration central.

The Super Bowl is five months off, but already, contracts are being signed, menus planned and money exchanged for some of the top-tier events coming to town.

The week leading up to the Feb. 5 Super Bowl promises a night-after-night string of events unlike anything the area has witnessed. But if it's all to come together, the behind-the-scenes work has to happen now.

It is, but in some cases nervously. Those throwing the parties need to reserve locations. The owners of top restaurants and nightclubs are trying to lock in rentals -- and at the right price.

"The Super Bowl itself is just like two hours," said New York-based event planner Robert Tuchman, president of TSE Sports & Entertainment. "But the parties, man, that's what everyone really does at the Super Bowl."

"The Super Bowl is the only event that can take over any city and stop everything that is going on. It's going to be nonstop action. It's going to be like no other event. ... It's where corporate America comes to party and everyone else follows."

More than 200 private and public events will be hosted in Detroit in honor of Super Bowl XL, according to the host committee. And those are just the cream of the crop.

Tuchman said planners will spend anywhere from \$20,000 to beyond \$1 million renting out Detroit-area establishments, supplying food and drinks and passing out extravagant gifts to the lucky few who score invitations. Some of Detroit's top venues already have fetched six-figure price tags.

Some plans are set in stone, while other top-notch establishments are still parading out-of-towners through their clubs, bars and restaurants, hoping to sign contracts before the end of October.

Monday is the end date for an exclusivity contract that several area venues signed with the NFL. It gives the football league and top-tier sponsors first dibs at securing spaces for league-sanctioned parties. After the contract expires, the venues are free to talk with anyone who wants to use their space, staff and services. Some opted not to sign, wanting to keep open their doors for as many potential customers as possible.

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Already on deck are a \$150-per-person public event scheduled for the Royal Oak Music Theatre that will be hosted by Playboy Playmates, a private FHM magazine party at Detroit's Bleu Room Experience, a grand food affair in Novi that carries a minimum \$500-per-person price tag and a private NFL Players Association party at the Opera House in downtown Detroit.

Big nerves, big money

There's a mixture of excitement, uncertainty and nervous energy among Detroit-area venue owners and managers, especially for those who haven't locked in events.

Many say they are in talks, waiting to work out a deal, trying to complete paperwork or that they can't divulge details of completed deals.

"There's been a lot of talk, but nothing solid," said Ron Mims, who manages downtown Detroit's Escape and Coco's House of Comedy. "Event planners from New York who did a couple of events for Magic Johnson" and Sean (Diddy) Combs "for the Jacksonville Super Bowl have come here and done a couple of walk-throughs. We're also in talks with some NBA players -- one agent out of Atlanta has taken some interest in bringing in some of the players that he represents to host parties here. I'm just glad to hear that not everyone has gotten solid deals yet."

Venue rental price varies -- and most owners aren't willing to throw numbers out.

Mims said that he's been told not to charge any less than \$30,000 for an NFL player wanting to rent for a night or less than \$80,000 to \$100,000 for a corporation that wants to take over. Together, his clubs, which are connected, hold about 1,500 people.

Matt Prentice, who runs Coach Insignia, the upscale restaurant on the top of the Renaissance Center, said he already has \$500,000 in bookings and sales for that venue and other events he's catering.

"Because there are a limited number of facilities in the Detroit metro area, people can charge a premium," said Justin Miller, general manager of the Royal Oak Music Theatre. "Everybody is charging more for the Super Bowl week, obviously. The Super Bowl is going to bring more people to the Detroit metro area than anything has brought here in the last 20 years. It's going to drive the market up."

That's a blessing and a curse.

The balance is figuring out how not to price yourself out of a possible rental, said Mike Dietz of Dietz Trott Sports and Entertainment, a sports marketing company based in Bingham Farms. Dietz's company already has locked up two private parties -- one for those who have tickets to the game, one for those who don't.

"They want to make sure they end up making more money than they did on a typical Tiger Opening Day. They want to make more than they did for the All-Star Game. That's where the negotiation is, how much should it be," Dietz said of venue owners. "But they run the risk of not having a party in there and not having a big day. What's fair is what you can get. If I own the venue, I'm going to try and get what the market will bear."

Challenges in Detroit

In a lot of ways, this is foreign territory for Detroit. Hosting a worldwide event like the Super Bowl

presents some unique challenges and obstacles.

"There's not a lot of hotel space that is right downtown, so a lot of our clients are in the suburbs. And picking venues has been a bit difficult. It's been a little bit of a problem trying to figure out where to have people stay," said Tuchman, who is hosting a celebrity poker tournament at the MotorCity Casino and a wine tasting with NFL players at the Troy Marriott. "We're going to be having shuttles that are going to be running to the base points from the hotel. The nice thing about it is Detroit is a little bit easier than Jacksonville. It was really spread out there. But at least in Detroit ... the roads are pretty easy to navigate."

Tom Patton owns downtown Detroit's Bleu Room Experience nightclub, a destination spot for out-of-town party planners. It's right on Woodward, within a short walking distance of other clubs, theaters, restaurants and Ford Field. It's also a prime nightclub to boot, frequently featuring celebrity-hosted and private events.

Thus far, Bleu has booked the FHM event on the Thursday night before Super Bowl Sunday. Patton is hoping to book a few more, and already he had to turn away video-game maker EA Sports, which wanted his place that same Thursday. "With the amount of calls we've gotten so far, I think we'll be booked from Wednesday through Sunday," Patton said.

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