

President's Response to the Report of the University Stadium Workgroup
Dr. Ken Kitts – August 29, 2019

Recently, a guest speaker at the University of North Alabama reminded us that we “must be willing to dream big if we expect our students to do the same.” Those powerful words continue to resonate with me and provide a fitting introduction for this response to the report by the University Stadium Workgroup. That panel of faculty, staff, students, and community members spent the last six months examining the possibility of a new stadium for UNA. I commend the members for producing a report that is thorough and insightful.

The workgroup began with a recommendation from elected student leaders who strongly voiced their support for a new stadium. If we are to remain true to our commitment to student-centered decision making at UNA, we must listen to our students when they speak so clearly on a topic.

Certainly, the proposal for a new stadium is big, complex, and expensive. We could easily become overwhelmed by the size of the project and declare it financially unrealistic. But is that really the right thing to do for UNA, and is that the message we want to send to our students?

The workgroup focuses most of its analysis on future needs at UNA and the possibilities that would accompany a new stadium. These points stand on their own merits but take on added urgency in the context of our current situation. The arrangement at Braly Stadium is unusual in the world of collegiate athletics. Few Division II and Division III colleges play in a stadium belonging to someone else. Of the 254 universities in the Division I ranks, we are aware of no others that play in a local high school stadium. This is not a distinction we covet. Our students, inclusive of those in the marching band, on our sports teams, and on our spirit squads, deserve a place to call their own. They deserve a place to call home.

Braly Stadium has seen its share of sports magic over the years. It will forever hold a special place in the hearts of the Lion faithful as the site of UNA's national championship run from 1993-1995, but Braly is owned by Florence City Schools and is home to the Florence Falcons. We do have an expanding web of relationships with FCS and enjoy a strong educational partnership with Dr. Jimmy Shaw and his staff. Moreover, we are grateful for the use agreement that gives us access to Braly even as we explore future options.

In terms of location, I understand the appeal of an on-campus stadium and know that such an addition would be welcomed by our students. Our best chance of getting into a new stadium is with significant help through private gifts, corporate support, or partnerships with public or private entities. Those dollars may well line up for an on-campus stadium. However, if external support begins to coalesce around an off-campus site in the Shoals, then we must be prepared to engage with key stakeholders accordingly. I ask all parties to remain open-minded regarding siting options. Wherever the location, it is important that a new stadium feature adequate

parking, modern amenities, UNA colors and branding, and the capability to host both athletic and non-athletic events.

The projected cost of a new stadium is approximately \$30 million. As with most large projects, this would require multiple sources of funding to reach that goal. Our students, eager to realize this dream, have expressed interest in using a dedicated fee to help with the cost. While I appreciate that sentiment and the passion to which it speaks, student fee revenue should not be contemplated as the primary source of funding for a new stadium. Also, I wish to restate my commitment that any new state dollars received through Project 208, our push for funding equity, will not be applied to the cost for a stadium. Those funds will be dedicated to academic support and existing campus needs.

This is a complicated process with many moving parts. It will take time to compile additional information, receive and process offers of assistance, and work with all stakeholders and the Board of Trustees to determine the best path forward for UNA. We have established a webpage (<https://www.una.edu/stadium/>) to make the stadium workgroup's report accessible and to facilitate public comments and suggestions on this topic. The initial feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

The challenge in navigating this process will be to practice patience when necessary while maintaining the excitement that the stadium study has begun to generate. The workgroup's report notes that excitement and concludes, "the time is right for this discussion to continue."

I couldn't agree more. It's time to dream big at UNA.