

Houston bidding to host 2026 World Baseball Classic

By Chandler France

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Houston is bidding to host another major international sporting event — and this time it's not for soccer.

The city has submitted a bid to host the 2026 World Baseball Classic, Janis Burke, CEO of the Harris County Houston Sports Authority, told the Houston Business Journal. The international baseball tournament, described as the “Olympics for baseball” by Burke, first debuted in 2006 and wrapped up its latest competition in March 2023. The tournament’s format is similar to that of the World Cup, with four pools of five teams competing in a double-elimination round-robin group stage where the top two teams in each pool advance to a single-elimination bracket.

The 2026 World Baseball Classic will be hosted by two cities in the U.S. and two international cities, similar to the tournament’s format in 2023. Last year, Taichung, Taiwan, and Phoenix each hosted first-round games; Tokyo hosted games for the first and second rounds; and Miami hosted first-, second- and championship-round games, including the championship game at LoanDepot Park.

Burke said there are 16 other cities in the running to host the next iteration of the tournament. Houston hopes to find out if it will host the World Baseball Classic prior to the start of the 2024 MLB season at the end of March, she added. Games would presumably be hosted at Minute Maid Park in downtown.

The World Baseball Classic would add another significant international tournament to the city’s agenda for 2026. The tournament would be played in the spring, right before the FIFA World Cup takes over later that summer. It’s still unclear how many matches and which rounds Houston will host for the event, but the city will likely see about half a dozen World Cup games.

“2026 could be our huge international year,” Burke said. “We think that could be really exciting to dub (2026) as our international year of events.”

The World Baseball Classic is coming off of its most successful year yet. Attendance specifically for the first round was over 1.01 million, a new record and a 98% increase from 2017, according to the MLB. Total attendance for the 2023 tournament was the highest ever, totaling more than 1.3 million, a 20% increase from the last time it was held in 2017, according to Sports Business Journal.

Additionally, the championship game was watched by a peak combined average audience of 6.5 million viewers in the U.S., the most-watched World Baseball Classic game ever nationally, according to SPJ. The tournament also finished with revenue of between \$90 million and \$100 million.

Miami drew record-breaking attendance for the latest tournament, according to the South Florida Business Journal. LoanDepot Park averaged 29,585 fans per game during the first round. Quarterfinals and semifinals games at the ballpark were near sellouts, while the final match between the U.S. and Japan filled up the stadium completely.

It's unclear whether the Houston Astros' hotel and entertainment center project would be completed in time for the tournament, as a construction timeline was not yet available when the club unveiled official details for the project in November 2023. Plans for the project, adjacent to Minute Maid Park, feature a 17-story, 300-key hotel and 60,000 square feet of retail and entertainment space. It's slated to break ground in fall 2024.

It seems likely that the format for the 2026 World Baseball Classic will remain the same as the 2023 iteration of the tournament, even as other sporting events like the FIFA World Cup and College Football Playoff expand and evolve. The 2026 World Cup is expanding to 48 teams with more than 100 games being played across three countries. Meanwhile, the CFP is expanding to a 12-team format in 2024, with the final four-team playoff concluding in Houston on Jan. 8.

"I don't foresee or actually want the tournament to be bigger than our traditional format," MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred said prior to the championship game for the 2023 World Baseball Classic.