

Wild Pitch

PETER DREIER DECEMBER 19, 2001

their executives, it is the season for deal making. As most fans are looking back on another season of what might have been (except for New York Yankee fans, who get to savor another World Series victory), the deal makers are looking to the future. Usually they have their eye on this question: How might we make more money? Bring in new superstars? Charge more for tickets? Build more luxury skyboxes? Tear down the old stadium? A great part of baseball's allure has to do with its sense of history. But in the business offices, an "out with the old, in with the new" attitude prevails. This is the case even in historic Boston, where the owners of the Red Sox are now drafting plans to tear down Fenway Park and to build a new ballpark.

As a baseball fan and former Boston city official, I heard of these developments and wanted to cry, "Say it ain't so." Boston enjoyed a tremendous season, with the Red Sox making it into the play-offs before bowing to the archrival Yankees. The ballpark was packed with avid fans, as it always is. And there was the mid-season All-Star game at Fenway Park, which was a highlight. It wasn't just the game, but what took place before it: An All-Century team of former greats introduced by Kevin Costner, comprising such stars as Ralph Kiner, Stan Musial, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, and Ted Williams took their places around the infield, turning venerable Fenway into a veritable "field of dreams."

The moment wasn't lost on the players. Unlike their counterparts in other sports, baseball players treasure the history of the game they're paid so well to play. Baltimore's Iron Man, Cal Ripken, couldn't wait to compare notes with the old-timers and waxed eloquently about how "the language of baseball transcends different eras." Before the game, Tony Gwynn of the San Diego Padres ran out to touch and write his name on Fenway's fabled "Green Monster" left-field wall (only 310 feet from home plate but 37 feet high). Colorado Rockies slugger Larry Walker declared, "I struck out at Fenway Park and I hit a come-backer to the mound, and I'm pretty proud of it."

The fans reveled in it, too and not just those lucky enough to get tickets for the game, but also the millions who watched it on television and the 100,000 who flocked into Boston for Major League Baseball's weekend Fan Fest and waited in line for hours to buy memorabilia and to get the autographs of current and past players.

You'd think big-league owners would appreciate and value the game's history, especially in a city like Boston, which prides itself on preserving its history and its historic sites. But now baseball is preparing to discard one of its most sacred shrines. Fenway Park, built in 1912, stands as the oldest park in baseball now that Detroit's Tiger Stadium, built the same year, has been retired.

Maybe to those who don't follow baseball or who don't care about the Red Sox, this seems a minor matter. Yet the story says something important about our political priorities. For one thing, the Red Sox owners aren't making a purely private business decision. They want major government assistance in their scheme to replace Fenway.

Over the past three decades, professional sports has become a big business and, like most businesses, wants to have it both ways: resenting government regulation but welcoming public subsidies. Team owners and league officials resist efforts by the federal government to impose antitrust rules and by local governments to keep teams from leaving. At the same time, owners of even successful franchises now demand publicly funded new stadiums and arenas as the ransom to keep them playing in their hometowns. Sports teams now routinely play cities against each other, encouraging each to up the ante of public subsidies for new facilities.

In San Antonio, for example, the Spurs (last year's National Basketball Association champions) are putting \$28.5 million down and in return are getting a new \$175-million arena to remain where they are. The state of Illinois spent over \$200 million to replace historic Comiskey Park with an inferior stadium for the Chicago White Sox. In Florida, Broward County is spending \$212 million to build a new hockey arena for the Florida Panthers owned by billionaire Wayne Huizenga.

In most of these cases, team owners adopt a take-it-or-leave-it approach. But almost always, there are other options that would be cheaper for the taxpayers and better for the fans. Boston is the perfect example. There are ample grounds to challenge Red Sox arguments for building a new ballpark with taxpayers' help. There is also a way Major League Baseball could step in to save Fenway Park. Let's look first at the Red Sox rationale for rebuilding.

The Red Sox claim that the current park, with 33,871 seats (the smallest in the major leagues), is "economically obsolete" and that they need the additional revenue from luxury boxes, stadium seats, and the other frills of newfangled stadiums in order to "compete" with teams that have them. But the Red Sox compete now. They made it to the American League play-offs. And the Red Sox have competed. Since free agency for players began, they have been second in the major leagues in games won (trailing only those damn Yankees). They made it into the World Series in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and came close during the 1990s. Granted, they haven't won it all since 1918, the year before they traded Babe Ruth to New York, but that may have more to do with the "Curse of the Bambino" than with the ballpark they play in.

In fact, a major reason they have been able to compete is that their overhead is so low. The team owned since 1934 by the late Tom Yawkey, then by his widow, and now by a family trust has had the luxury of owning its own home for years and so has been spared the cost of making mortgage payments.

Second, the Red Sox say it's cheaper to build a new ballpark than to fix up Fenway Park. Not true. Architects and engineers hired by Save Fenway Park!, a Boston-based, grass-roots, nonprofit organization, came up with a plan that saves the field, the Green Monster, the first 10 rows of seats, and the building facade and rebuilds the rest of the stadium with all the modern-day amenities and more seats for less money than what constructing a new facility would cost. An independent study by a consulting firm estimated that rehabilitating the existing park instead of building a new one would save approximately \$40 million. Other analysts contend that by avoiding the land-takings and relocation of existing business that a new park would require, the project could save double that amount, all of which is planned to come out of taxpayers' pockets.

ADVERTISEMENT Third, the Red Sox say their fans will like the new Fenway Park better, with its wider seats, unobstructed views, food courts, and additional toilets. But the fans seem to like the old Fenway Park just fine. Win or lose, close to 2.5 million people pass through its turnstiles every year not just to root for the home team, but to watch baseball played where it's always been played and to see Fenway Park, the top tourist attraction in New England. A new stadium, without the history and handed-down memories of generations of fans, couldn't guarantee that kind of turnout year after year.

The Red Sox argue the park would be the same well, almost, anyway. They promise to build a new park with all the quirks of the old one. They point to the success of the new "retro ballparks" in Baltimore and Cleveland, built to resemble older stadiums like Fenway Park and Wrigley Field, which are part of urban neighborhoods. But Baltimore's Camden Yards took the place of the concrete bowl of Memorial Stadium and Jacobs Field replaced Cleveland Municipal Stadium, the "mistake by the lake." This is Fenway Park we're talking about, the "lyric little bandbox of a park" that John Updike described in his famous New Yorker essay "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," the place where Babe Ruth pitched, Ted Williams hit, Yaz played left field, and Bucky Dent and the Yankees . . . well, not all the memories are happy ones. Besides, why bother with a replica when they've got the real thing? Nobody wants to build a new version of the Alamo.

Finally, the Red Sox tout the economic benefits that a new ballpark would generate and they've got a "consultants' report" to back up their claims. They would have us believe not only that the new park will contain more seats, but also that a higher percentage of those seats will be filled more often. They also say fans will spend more money, both inside and outside the new ballpark an average of \$110 per person. That's a lot of peanuts and Cracker Jacks!

Fans in a new park aren't likely to be any more hungry than they were in an old one, and after buying tickets at inflated prices, they'll probably have less to spend once they get inside. Plus, as documented in several recent books including Mark Rosentraub's *Major League Losers*, Neil deMause and Joanna Cagan's *Field of Schemes*, and *Sports, Jobs & Taxes* by Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist taxpayer-funded sports stadiums of the past generation have almost all been boondoggles in terms of creating decent jobs, catalyzing local businesses, and repaying public loans. In fact, the public subsidies typically exceed the economic benefits.

One might wonder why the Red Sox are so determined to scrap Fenway Park. It's strictly business. They can make more money by moving than by staying put. Here's how it would work. First, the Red Sox would get public money to increase the value of their existing continuing asset (while the Red Sox plan to kick in an estimated \$350 million to build a new ballpark, they're looking for about \$200 million in taxpayers' money to buy the land and other infrastructure improvements). Then they would turn around and sell or develop part of their old asset, the land that the current Fenway Park sits on. It's a perfect double playor maybe a double steal.

What can be done to save Fenway Park and to stop the biggest heist Boston has seen since the infamous 1950 Brink's robbery? Political leaders in Boston and throughout Massachusetts could just say no to this latest request for corporate welfare. That's not likely, though. Many public officials, including Boston Mayor Tom Menino, either seem to believe the Red Sox's propaganda or don't want to offend the powerful business interests that are pushing for yet another major government-subsidized construction project.

Alternatively, public officials could try a squeeze play to force the Red Sox to renovate Fenway Park by limiting how much they're willing to contribute in public funds. Massachusetts officials did this earlier in the year when they set a limit of \$70 million in public funds to help build a new football stadium for the New England Patriots, who were threatening to move from Foxborough (a town near Boston) to Hartford, Connecticut.

But here's the key point: It wasn't just the hard line taken by state politicians that kept the Patriots from accepting a \$340-million subsidy from the state of Connecticut to move across the border. It was the involvement of the National Football League (NFL), which voted to change league policy and invest \$140 million to help build a new stadium to keep the Patriots inside Boston's major media market. The NFL got involved because league leaders recognized that it was good for their game and good for business.

Major League Baseball should take a lesson from football and similarly step up to the plate. They should make the Red Sox an offer they can't refuse by helping them "remain competitive" in a "modern ballpark" as long as it involves renovating the existing Fenway Park.

It's clear that cities and states have a hard time resisting when important businesses, including sports teams, start to throw their weight around. How out of whack can things get when teams provoke bidding wars between cities and states for franchises? In 1995 Cleveland offered to spend \$175 million in public money to repair the Cleveland Browns' stadium to keep them from moving to Baltimore at the same time the city was closing 11 public schools for lack of money.

Of course, Congress could step in, too. Several years ago, Melvin Burstein and Arthur Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis recommended that the federal government help put an end to these wasteful bidding wars by prohibiting cities and states from subsidizing this competition. Congress, they said, could stop the use of local tax breaks and subsidies that are targeted for specific businesses by making the value of such tax abatements and subsidies subject to federal taxes and by reducing federal funds to states and cities that engage in such competition. The guiding principle should be to discourage subsidies to specific firms when there's no obvious net benefit—for example, when the incentives don't create more jobs but simply reshuffle existing jobs geographically, or when the subsidies cost more than the overall benefits, which is the case with most sports schemes.

But Congress surely won't act fast enough to save Fenway. And while baseball fans settle into the off-season, the deal makers will be hard at work. Perhaps with the right combination of public awareness, political leadership, and the intervention of baseball's top brass, a new deal can be struck. Baseball's leaders especially should recognize the league's self-interest in saving one of the game's last remaining crown jewels. Only Fenway Park and Wrigley Field remain. If those two go, what's left of baseball's past? The game might just as well have been invented by Ted Turner as by Abner Doubleday or Alexander Cartwright.

Here's hoping that Major League Baseball and the Boston Red Sox come to their senses, appreciate the importance of tradition and history, and look at the new handwriting on the wall, including Tony Gwynn's autograph on Fenway's left-field landmark.

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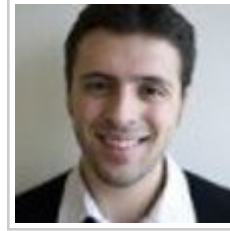
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