

POLICY BRIEF
An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

May 31, 2001

Volume 1, Number 12

Baseball Stadiums: A Tale of Three Cities

What do Pittsburgh, Minneapolis and St. Louis have in common? They are similar sized metro areas with major league baseball franchises. Two of the teams are performing very well, posting two of the best win-loss records in the major leagues. Needless to say, the Pirates are not one of those teams.

There are several instructive observations to make about this situation, but most important is the fact that neither St. Louis nor Minneapolis-St. Paul has a brand new state-of-the-art, retro design, taxpayer-funded stadium. The Cardinals play in Busch Stadium, a 35-year-old virtual duplicate of Three Rivers Stadium, and are drawing nearly 40,000 people per game. That is not news. They have had excellent attendance for years.

Meanwhile, the Minnesota Twins play their games in the 20-year-old Metrodome, another stadium that has been decried as unsuitable for baseball. Three short years ago, the owners of the Twins were threatening to sell the team to an investor who would take the team to North Carolina if Minnesota taxpayers declined to fund a new ballpark. Voters in Minnesota said no to the attempted blackmail and no tax money was forthcoming. Unfortunately for the Twins owners and would be buyers, voters in Winston-Salem and Greensboro rejected a proposed tax hike that would have been used for stadium construction. Likewise, opinion polls and comments from City legislators and civic leaders in Charlotte (once highly touted as the future home of the Pirates) made it abundantly clear that taxpayer funding for a new baseball stadium was not going to happen there.

So, the Twins remain stuck in Minnesota in the old, unfit Metrodome with a player payroll less than half the Pirates payroll. But somehow they have managed to keep pace with the best teams in the American League. Their attendance is up 86 percent from a year ago even without a brand new stadium. By comparison, Pirates attendance in their new park is 60 percent above the 2000 season pace.

It is also noteworthy that the Montreal Expos, who play in front of dismally small crowds and have serious financial problems, have not been able to find a new home. Both Minnesota and Montreal would have jumped at a real opportunity to move. But there was, and still is, no place to go.

The same was true for the Pirates in 1997-1998, they weren't going anywhere either. The difference between here and Minnesota? Our political leaders didn't have the courage of the voters' convictions. The voters overwhelmingly rejected the blackmail threat and stood their

ground, defeating the proposed half percent sales tax in all 11 counties covered by the referendum. There was wisdom and good sense in that vote. But in the end, the voters' wishes were ignored.

And to make matters worse, baseball's economics is even more out-of-whack than it was in 1997. It has been and continues to be painfully obvious that a new ballpark won't save a small market team as long as the escalation of salaries continues unabated as it has for the past 20 years. Even if every major league City was magically presented a new state-of-the-art stadium, there would still be great disparities in teams' on-field performance and the financial problems faced by smaller market teams would remain.

A review of this year's win-loss records of major league teams makes the point. There is simply no correlation between the newness of a team's ballpark and their performance on the field. For every Seattle, which is enjoying a good season, there is Houston or Detroit or Texas Rangers who are mediocre at best notwithstanding new facilities. Indeed, it is ironic that three of the best records in baseball are sported by teams playing in the three oldest ballparks.

So, What's next for small market teams? Could we be looking at taxpayer subsidies for operating expenses in the not-too-distant future? (This is a fear not a suggestion)

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President

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