

POLICY BRIEF

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The Thrill is Gone

To put it mildly, attendance at PNC Park so far in 2003 is seriously disappointing. After failing to draw 2 million fans in the second year at the new ballpark, the Pirates have seen attendance drop another 25 percent in the first four games this year compared to 2002. In a stunning development, the home opener was not a sellout, falling almost 2,000 short of the 37,898 needed to fill the seats. Home openers at Three Rivers Stadium routinely drew over 40,000.

Since opening night, the drop off from comparable 2001 and 2002 periods is simply astonishing. Not even those of us who warned that a decline in attendance was to be expected after a couple of years in a new ballpark could have imagined such a precipitous decline in the second and third years. The Pirates are currently on a pace that will match the average non-strike years of the 1990s at Three Rivers Stadium.

Obviously, the team can argue that with more luxury boxes and in-park advertising they are benefiting from the new park despite slumping attendance. However, attendance does affect revenue from concessions and that is probably much lower than hoped. And of course, revenues from tickets sales must be down significantly. Moreover, falling attendance has important consequences beyond the Pirates' revenue losses. For one thing, the City will collect less amusement and parking tax revenues.

Then we must consider the impact on stadium related businesses such as nearby bars and restaurants. These firms depend heavily on game day sales. With only 81 home dates per year, it is vital that the team attract large crowds. Otherwise much of the ballyhooed private development the new stadium was supposed to generate will never materialize. If attendance continues to disappoint, this could be a tough summer for stadium-related businesses.

To be fair, there has been some drop off in attendance in other major league cities attendance so far this year owing to bad weather in many cities and the sluggish economy. However, we note that the St. Louis Cardinals are in the top five teams in attendance figures this year. The Cardinals have been a top drawing team for many years even though they play in a privately owned, 38 year old stadium that is a virtual twin of the now departed Three Rivers Stadium. For years we were told that Three Rivers

Stadium was not designed well for baseball and that attendance was being depressed because the stadium was not a good place to watch games.

It is apparent, or should be, that attendance is directly related to the size of the dedicated fan base. The St. Louis metro area is no larger than Pittsburgh and it has a ballpark design that we were told discourages attendance. Still, they manage to draw more fans than three quarters of all major league teams. We have spent a lot of the taxpayers' money and goodwill to re-learn something we already knew. A new ballpark is clearly not a substitute for a large, growing fan base.

Even in Cleveland, attendance is way down from the glory days when Jacobs Field first opened. Meanwhile, Detroit and Milwaukee have seen little or no sustainable improvement in attendance after moving into new ballparks and currently rank in the bottom fourth in home attendance. Obviously, the thrill is gone in places other than Pittsburgh.

Taxpayers in Allegheny County and across the state were hit hard in the pocketbook to pay for a new ballpark that was justified largely by exorbitant claims of spin-off benefits that would come in the wake of new stadium construction. So far the taxpayers are getting little or no return on their large investments. That is the unpleasant reality. It cannot be glossed over by clever marketing campaigns and bobblehead doll giveaways.

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