

SAVING THE TWINS FOR THE TWIN CITIES

A friend of mine, a lifelong Twins fan now living in Indiana, has a lament: Major League Baseball owners, he writes me, appear ready

to eliminate one of the original 16 major league franchises because the Twins can't squeeze the park they'd like out of their state and local governments. The Twins could...afford a park that would do them some good and probably persuade the owners not to axe them, if they would deign to consider a traditional park design. But they are not going to do this. Rather, they are going to hold out for what [Gov. Jesse Ventura] refuses to give them, and find themselves closed down as a result. This raises a number of questions about their practical rationality---like the questions that would be raised by a starving man who refused to buy economical food with the change in his pocket, insisting that someone treat him to steak.

My friend's description of the Twins' situation is apt but incomplete. First, it assumes that Twins owner Carl Pohlad and his family care about the Twins' survival; whereas what recently has become clear is that the Pohlad family cares foremost about making money from the Twins even if it means allowing the Twins to cease to exist. Second, no team owned by someone worth a billion dollars is poor. If the Twins behave like a team without financial resources, it is because their owners have refused to support them with the financial resources at their command. Third, my friend's analysis makes no mention of the despicable spectacle of Major League Baseball punishing a community for refusing to finance a stadium for its baseball team; and make no mistake about it, that is exactly what will be occurring if the Twins are required to fold up their operation. And finally, perhaps most painfully, it doesn't account for the responsibility that the political culture of the Twin Cities bears for not being able to resolve the Twins' stadium dilemma. What follows is an outside observer's proposal for a last ditch effort to save the Twins for the Twin Cities.

First: the ability of Major League Baseball to close down a team on short notice needs to be challenged by whatever legal means are available. This has been done by the Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission, with whom the Twins have a valid lease through the 2002 season. But even if it's too late to save the Twins, politicians at every level have not only the right but the duty to define the public obligations of industries such as Major League Baseball that are the recipients of public monies.

Second: the Twins need new owners. The current owners now stand revealed as unworthy of a *de facto* public trust such as a professional baseball team; and in light of recent events, public subsidies for the Pohlads would be the essence of stupidity. It is a fine thing to make money from owning a baseball team, but nobody should own a team who is not willing and able to lose money operating it. G.K. Chesterton once wrote of the paradoxical nature of courage, that its essence is that one has to be a little careless of one's life even in order to preserve it. Successful ownership of a baseball team is similar, in this respect: you've got to spend money in order to make money, and if you have to ask the price of admission to the club you can't afford to belong.

Third: both the business community and the political community need to step up, first to find new owners for the Twins, and then to assist in the financing of a new ballpark. This does not mean that either the Twins or Major League Baseball are entitled to such assistance; and I respect the position of my many friends who argue against public subsidies of any sort for new stadium construction. Nevertheless, in the contemporary culture of professional baseball, public

assistance for new ballpark construction is also prerequisite to being in the game. This does not mean that the culture of baseball is not to be challenged; but it must be challenged intelligently, with financial aid to the Twins balanced by corresponding concessions from the Twins for the public good. Thus far, the political culture of the Twin Cities has failed to do this, pursuing instead a policy characterized partly by process considerations but even more by political and business in-fighting that together have precluded the kinds of ballpark and neighborhood design studies necessary to determine costs and effectively build public support.

How therefore should the Twin Cities go about building the Twins a ballpark? The first thing should be to set a legal cap on public funding of \$150M as an incentive to the team to build small and build smart--which it is possible to do and still generate industry standard and competitive revenues. The most important thing however is to insist upon a traditional urban ballpark like Wrigley Field or Fenway Park: a ballpark conceived as part of a neighborhood, and shaped by the physical characteristics of a constrained site (7-9 acres for the ballpark footprint, 25 acres minimum for the whole ballpark / neighborhood design project). As other important issues are addressed--e.g., Twins and Major League Baseball programmatic and revenue-generating concerns, transportation and parking issues, potential financing mechanisms, adjacent ancillary neighborhood development opportunities, local political considerations, etc--it is critical to understand such issues as secondary to the imperative to make a neighborhood ballpark, and to not allow these secondary issues to drive the project. Finally, the Twin Cities should jointly fund and sponsor a limited architectural competition that includes several sites and several design teams (including but *not* limited to the major sports facilities architects such as HOK and Ellerbe Becket) working in a public environment and subject to design guidelines informed by the objectives described above. Such a process would not only be a quick way to determine ballpark costs, revenue-generating potential, and neighborhood development opportunities, but would also be a way to hold the architects, the Twins, and Major League Baseball accountable to legitimate public interests. It's not worth keeping the Twins at all cost, but it is certainly worth trying to keep them as part of a coherent strategy to maintain and improve the quality of life in the Twin Cities.

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