MLB STADIUM MODERNIZATION: IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

POSTSCRIPT ©

By: Jeffrey Schlerf

My previous three-part series discussed Major League Baseball and its teams have approached the replacement or upgrading of ballparks.[1] The series began with a description of the franchises most challenged, including the A's and Rays who would go on to play in minor league parks. The second part of this article examined the NFL's history in dealing with venue issues and how the league's process has evolved. The final segment provided recommendations on how MLB can improve the way it as a league addresses stadium modernization.

This postscript provides an update on the efforts by certain ball clubs to improve or replace their stadiums. One franchise (the Athletics) after more than two decades finally found a solution to its facility needs at the cost of abandoning a fan base after 57 years for a new market. Tampa Bay - another franchise with a protracted search - under new ownership group appears to also be there after recent local government approvals. Two other clubs, one (the White Sox) in the US's third largest market and another (the Royals) in an area with historic baseball roots, continue their quests to replace their outdated ballparks. Their situations hold promise but there is still uncertainty. Arizona was able to secure the amount of funding it thought was needed for significant renovations, but as described below there are lingering challenges. Finally, while the Angels have not made any progress since their failed, scandal ridden attempt to acquire their stadium and surrounding land, there is now room for optimism with the announcement of a sale to Stan Kroenke.

Notwithstanding some progress through the passage of time by these teams, the question remains – shouldn't MLB develop a new overall approach like the framework proposed in Part 3 of this series?

Athletics: This franchise's ownership had been seeking a new venue since the early 2000's. Long protracted negotiations between Alameda County and the City of Oakland over public funding and location finally died. The Athletics began playing in Sacramento in a minor league facility with a less than 14,000 seat capacity in 2025. Last Fall, after some machinations, team owner John Fisher was finally able to obtain a commitment for public financing towards constructing a new stadium in Las Vegas at the former site of the Tropicana Casino. Clark County Nevada will contribute up to $380 million towards construction costs plus $25 million for infrastructure. The remainder of the current estimated $2 billion cost for a domed 33,000 seat capacity building will be borne by the team. The new facility will be part of a planned $1.19

[1] See https://gibraltarsports.com/insights/

billion mixed use development by Bally's Corp. including a casino, hotel, theater, restaurants, retail and entertainment. The baseball venue is expected to open for the 2028 season, meaning the Athletics will end their run playing in a minor league for three full seasons.

Tampa Bay: While a much newer franchise than the Athletics, the Rays have been searching for a new facility in the Tampa Bay area for a similar length of time. For years there was a public tug of war between the St. Petersburg and Tampa areas, on either side of the Bay. By mid-2024, it appeared the franchise had finally struck a deal with the local governments in the St. Petersburg area. It was publicly announced that through a private-public partnership a $6+ billion mixed use project would include a new $1.3 billion home for the Rays. Pinellas County and the City of St. Petersburg would contribute half of the venue's cost, with the team obligated for the remainder plus any cost overruns. But then mother nature and politics intervened. Torrential winds from Hurricane Milton destroyed Tropicana Field's roof, resulting in major rain and wind damage and flooding at the aging ballpark. At the time public funding for the new stadium remained subject to local legislative approval. The budgetary implications from the hurricane's damage (repairs were estimated at more than $56 million) and funding dovetailed with the political campaign season. As local authorities deliberated over their fiscal status and reevaluated the scale of government funding for a new sports facility, legislative sessions for approval were delayed. At the same time, the Rays' ownership publicly began reconsidering its commitment to the stadium project. The team expressed concern they would be without a home for at least one season and now the proposed new venue would be delayed to no earlier than the 2029 season. In need of a temporary facility for 2025 the Rays soon announced they would share a minor league ballpark with the Yankee's Single A affiliate, in *Tampa*. This only fed the speculation the Rays would indeed back out of the new development project in St. Petersburg, and soon they did exactly that. During the summer of 2025, amidst the negative publicity which followed that decision, news broke that the club was being sold for $1.7 billion to a group led by Patrick Zalupski, a Jacksonville based businessman. The transaction closed that September. After the deal was announced new ownership expressed a commitment to keep the club in the Tampa Bay area, with Tampa as a priority. Soon plans unfolded for a mixed-use development – a portion of which would be publicly funded – including a new park adjacent to Hillsborough Community College, near the Buccaneers' Raymond James Stadium. Finally, the Rays long quest for a new "forever" home seems to be at the finish line, as in late August the franchise received city and county approval for the proposed public funding. After three decades in St. Petersburg, it appears the team's new venue will be in Tampa.

Kansas City:

After the referendum for stadium funding for both the Royals and NFL's Chiefs was defeated by the Jackson County Missouri voters in April 2024, various potential locations were publicly floated on either side of the Missouri – Kansas boundary. Then in December 2025 the Chief's announced they would be constructing a $3 billion domed building in Wyandotte County, Kansas. The cost of the new venue, expected to be completed in 2031, is reported to be funded 70 percent by the State of Kansas, with the County also providing a subsidy of $450 million. This development appeared to serve as a catalyst for officials in Kansas City (Mo.) to attempt to arrive at a solution for the Royals. In April of this year, the Royals announced plans for a new ballpark in partnership with Hallmark Cards as part of a mixed development project on 85 acres at Crown Plaza. Of the estimated cost of $1.9 billion, more than a majority will be privately funded by the Royals, with the City committed to fund $600 million. While City Council's August vote in favor of this funding was encouraging, there is another potential complication. A citizens group is pushing an initiative, which is subject to a public vote probably occurring next April, to enact a requirement that all stadium projects in the municipality beyond a certain scale be first approved by public referendum. The challenge for the Royals and the city is that not only do they not know whether this will become a requirement for several more months, but also if the voters do approve the requirement, then there will have to be a subsequent public vote on whether this project should be approved. Public comments by certain officials indicate the City intends to proceed with its plans related to the development. Obviously there is legal and financial risk to the team and the municipality as they move forward.

Chicago White Sox:

Since Part 3 of the series, the future ownership of the White Sox has changed. In June 2025, the club announced that in connection with billionaire Justin Ishbia increasing his investment in the team, he and 90-year-old owner Jerry Reinsdorf reached an agreement whereby Ishbia could acquire Reinsdorf's controlling interest beginning in 2029 and the years following. Like the Rays scenario, a new ownership mix is creating momentum for a new stadium. Earlier this year reports surfaced providing details on plans by Ishbia's firm, Shore Capital, to acquire an existing rail yard from Amtrak (the 14th Street Yard) at the South Loop across the river from a development named "The 78" (where Chicago's MLS club is building a soccer facility). More recently Ishbia publicly unveiled more definitive plans for a mixed-use project at that site referred to as "The Railyards." This acquisition is tied to an overall plan for Amtrak to relocate from there and expand operations in Bridgeport, which is within the vicinity of the White Sox existing South Side home at Comisky Park. An entity formed by Ishbia, Canal Edge, is reported to be partnering with Amtrak for a new $900 million rail maintenance hub at that location and $600 million in federal grants were recently awarded to the project. This move by Amtrak would appear to pave the way for the White Sox to exit from its historic roots in the South Side to The Railyards along the river. While fans will not be pleased with this relocation, and local politicians are already weighing in, at least this may end periodic talk by Mr. Reinsdorf about leaving Chicago altogether.

LA Angels: Little transpired following the Angels' failed attempt a few years ago to acquire and develop their stadium and surrounding property from the City of Anaheim. In fact, there was very little positive news for the franchise – that is, until a recent announcement of new ownership discussed below. The team and Anaheim did agree to an extension of their lease, but otherwise friction including legal disputes (specifically, inclusion of "Anaheim" in the franchise's name) with the City have continued. And the misery on the Angels' aging ball field has not changed. As of the first week of September of the current season they had the worst record in MLB. The team has suffered financially from the downfall of the RSN local television model. While the franchise and Anaheim continue to squabble over the condition of the 60-year-old ballpark and maintenance, Anaheim has undertaken a detailed engineering evaluation. Just when it appeared the club had hit rock bottom, at the beginning of September news surfaced that owner Arte Moreno was selling a controlling interest in the organization to Stan Kroenke for a record setting $4 billion valuation. Kroenke is not only well known in the LA market as the owner of the NFL Rams, but also owns franchises in the NBA, NHL, MLS and the Premier League. A change in ownership alone is viewed as positive news. The depth of Kroenke's experience in sports ownership and the real estate industry, as reflected in the development of the Rams' state of the art SoFi Stadium and surroundings, was immediately perceived as very promising news for the Angels and their prospects for a new venue.

Arizona Diamondbacks: In September 2025 the Arizona Governor signed legislation approving $500 million in funding for renovations and improvements to the Diamondbacks' home at Chase Field, to be funded by a site-specific sales tax. At that time the team announced it would contribute an additional $250 million. However, the franchise's current lease with the Maricopa County Stadium District expires after the 2027 season and an extension has yet to be agreed upon. And earlier this year the Diamondbacks announced that the total cost of the project will be significantly higher than originally estimated. The club will need to prioritize upgrading the HVAC system – obviously a critical feature in the sweltering Arizona heat - which is estimated to cost $300 million (exceeding its agreed commitment) and take two years. This will mean "fan-facing," revenue enhancing improvements such as premium seating will be put on hold. At present, the Diamondbacks and government officials are at a standstill on a lease extension, which is holding up public funding. Time will tell whether this situation is a brewing major headache for MLB and the franchise, but that time appears to be running short.

Summary:

As of mid-2024 when this series was being released the ballpark status of the above six teams, constituting 20 percent of the league, was uncertain. At that time the situations for two other franchises had just been resolved. Two years later one club – the A's – has been finally able to construct a stadium after a more than twenty-year effort. That entailed a relocation to a new city, Las Vegas, from its home in Oakland of over five decades. Tampa Bay, Kansas City and Chicago, following several gyrations, appear to have positive momentum at a targeted location for a new building as part of a large mixed use development project backed by partial public funding. Even if these three teams, making up one tenth of MLB's total franchises, do succeed in their pursuits, realistically none of them will move out of their aging, outdated venues (among the 8 oldest in MLB) to a new home any sooner than the next decade. A year ago the Arizona Diamondbacks received approval of public funding for major facility improvements and upgrades but now that is complicated by the spiraling estimated costs and a lease expiration date nearing. Lastly, the Angels (in the 4th oldest MLB venue) are currently without any plans for a new or renovated park and embroiled in disputes with local government, although a just announced proposed sale brings some hope the club will escape its prolonged quagmire.

What has and has not transpired the past two plus years demonstrates the league can do better by evolving from what historically has been and appears to continue to be an ad hoc, hand's off approach. Part 3 of this series offered very specific means for improvement in how the league's stadiums are modernized. Several concepts were introduced including league-supported expanded funding, changes to revenue sharing formulas, increased emphasis on and support of development projects and adoption of facility standards. An overall more formal, integrated process than what the current and former MLB Commissioners have applied historically is necessary, along the lines of what is described in Part 3. And a new approach to expansion would complement this framework.

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