MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL AND DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

For the last half-century, sports has been used by cities as a tool of downtown revitalization, with mixed degrees of success. The unique importance of sports in the American zeitgeist ensures that the development of the venues that house professional and collegiate sports teams sometimes exists in a realm outside that of economic or social logic; major cities throw incredible amounts of money at already rich owners in hopes of luring their teams, often at the expense of schools and social welfare programs, and, for the most part, the public encourages it. In the end, the owners gain the use of incredibly expensive publicly funded sporting palaces that increase the value of their teams tremendously, and pay the city next to nothing in rent. While this has become the norm in the major professional sports, the minors, particularly minor league baseball, often veritably operate in a different universe. Minor league clubs attract a smaller fan base from smaller cities that could never support the costs of the majors. Whereas major league venue subsidies are almost always grossly beyond what any city should arguably be willing to risk on a private venture whose benefits are not economically obvious, when minor league cities subsidize minor league venues, the costs are usually in much better
proportion to the economic profile of the city, and some minor league owners are even willing to pay for their own ballparks. Minor league baseball can be an effective investment in a struggling downtown, if its development is carried out with careful planning and attention to exactly how it should benefit the district.
Purpose

This paper focuses on cities with minor league baseball teams for several reasons, however the main motivation is the wide variety of cities that now or could potentially host a minor league baseball club. Because of the stratification of the minor leagues they are capable of serving cities large and small, regardless of the presence of other professional sports, and, because the season runs through the summer, climate is not a limiting factor anywhere in the United States (even Alaska has a semi-pro league). Finally, unlike the other major professional spectator sports in North America, baseball enjoys widespread appeal that transcends the regional differences that keep, for example, ice hockey from becoming widely popular nationally.

The minor leagues are different from the majors in several ways that are significant to the nature of the venues in which they play. Whereas the major leagues have always been limited to fewer than 30 cities nationwide, there is ostensibly no limit to the number of minor league clubs that can operate at any one time. From the origins of the minor leagues in the late 19th Century through the 1930s, all minor league clubs were significantly more independent from the majors
in terms of economics and filling rosters than they are today. With the onset of the depression in the 1930s clubs in minor leagues began signing player contracts with major league clubs to help to stay afloat; this contract system was strengthened over the years and continues to be the primary business relationship between the major and minor leagues. As of the 2011 season, there are 219 Minor League Baseball (MiLB, the association of leagues that negotiates with the majors) member clubs playing in 170 cities in the United States, Canada, and the Dominican Republic (the Mexican Baseball League is also a MiLB member league, however its clubs do not take major league player contracts). Given the nature of player contracts, this number is relatively static and has remained generally stable over the last two decades. However, the increasing profitability of baseball over the last decade in particular has led to the formation of leagues outside the MiLB association. These so-called independent leagues do not have any affiliation with the major leagues, and afford a greater deal of autonomy in the operation of their constituent clubs. Because of the success of independent leagues, and their wide geographic distribution across the United States, it is not unreasonable for even modest-sized American cities to attract a ball club.

Minor league baseball is attractive for small-market cities for several reasons. For many major urban areas that have been left behind by major league expansion, such as Indianapolis and Charlotte, the minor league ballparks constitute a much more reasonable investment than major league parks; a difference that continues to grow each season as major league teams jump in value seemingly
exponentially. At the top level of the minor leagues, Class-AAA, the quality of play is still very high relative to the majors, while the costs to both the city and the spectator are drastically reduced. In addition, all minor league parks guarantee 40 to 80 days of activity a year.

The construction of new minor league ballparks in the urban core is often undertaken as part of an ongoing trend in downtown revitalization that attempts to transform the central business district into the center of culture and entertainment for the city and/or region. This “festival center” approach includes siting as many tourism-focused venues in the downtown as available, and scheduling events throughout the year that will attract both visitors and suburban residents. Many new ballparks are located downtown to contribute to the festival atmosphere that characterizes downtown as a place for culture, art, leisure and family entertainment. Baseball fits this mold because of its broad appeal, and minor league baseball can be particularly successful in this model because of its low cost to the spectator.

Furthermore, for cities that are unlikely to attract any other professional sports club (no other major sport\(^1\) has a minor league system that rivals that of baseball in terms of availability, scope or depth), the ball club, and the ballpark that goes with it, becomes part of the brand of the city, and, so the thinking goes, enhances that city’s attractiveness and national profile.\(^2\) All of these claims have been made to justify

\(^1\) In this paper “major sport” refers to the five most popular spectator sports in North America: American Football, Baseball, Basketball, Ice Hockey & Soccer.

\(^2\) Curry, T.J., et al. (2004). High Stakes: Big Time Sports Development and Downtown Redevelopment. The Ohio State University Press: Columbus, OH. Curry elaborates that:
sport venue construction using the public dollar, with the ultimate goal of “fixing”, or at least improving, downtown. However, the “build it, and they will come” mentality is not a flawless logic when it comes to something as complex as urban revitalization.

Planners, economists and social equity activists have questioned the value of the “festival center” approach in affecting real change in a community, particularly for its citizens. Critics argue that focusing economic development funds on large tourist-oriented entertainment complexes neglects to take the needs of current residents of redeveloped neighborhoods into account, often to the point of physically destroying said neighborhoods through eminent domain. These projects, which can range from open-air malls à la Harbor Place in Baltimore to multi-venue sports districts as in Columbus and Detroit, are focused specifically on tourists and upper- and middle-class residents, most of whom now live in the suburbs. As a result, those poor or working-class residents who are most effected by the development, both physically and economically, are left out of the process on both ends

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p.16

In his book *Retro Ball Parks: Instant History, Baseball, and the New American City*, Daniel Rosenswieg argues that the trend of developing unique ballparks featuring traditional design elements in a central urban area, a trend which arguably began with the construction of Camden Yards in Baltimore, has in turn produced an experience that is more authentic to baseball’s roots as a spectator sport, and yet equally inauthentic to baseball’s role in the city that surrounds it. While many of these “new-old” ballparks are more attractive than their predecessors, and appear to be endearingly odd-ball like the legendary parks of old, there are near insurmountable differences in their function and their interaction with the [sporting venues] are repeatedly referred to as major components in their respective downtowns’ ‘renaissance’. And certainly, if the number of increased downtown buildings or the pedestrian traffic on game days or at attractive new bars is an indication, those cities have gone through urban renaissances. The problem is, when discussing a downtown revitalization and renaissance, no one ever mentions (or touches base with) the vast majority of working-class and poor residents of those same cities.

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4 Rosenswieg, D. (2005). *Retro Ball Parks: Instant History, Baseball, and the New American City*. University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, TN. Rosenswieg discusses the dehumanizing effect of the previous generation of major league parks: [the architects of 1960s-1970s era multipurpose stadiums] were thought to have turned their backs on a century of unique, classic urban parks and instead drawn their ideas from the excessive rationality of postwar America. Monumental, cavernous, and round, these stadiums seemed inevitably to flatten out the experience for baseball fans insofar as each looked (and played) more or less like the others.

5 Ibid. Rosenswieg calls the experience of seeing a game at Camden Yards: a bit like a ride in an urban theme park” designed to help suburbanites attempt “to purchase temporary connection with much of what is often missing in gated communities and urban shopping and entertainment destinations – safe, random, low-stakes encounters with friends and acquaintances.
surrounding city. Whereas the ballparks of the early 20th Century featured nonsymmetrical dimensions because of the limitations presented by the functioning neighborhoods in which they were built, today’s retro parks are constructed atop plots that are purposely bulldozed of any old buildings; the odd dimensions of these parks generally are not a necessity of the site, but a consciously planned design element intended to support the retro motif. Parks designed this way can feel just as generic as any of the 1970s cookie-cutters because their supposedly unique design elements recur, in purpose, if not in aesthetics, so often in every new retro park built. Some of today’s retro ballparks could just as easily be constructed in the suburbs as in their inner-city locations, with no significant change in the experience for spectators. In the end ballparks of this sort do not contribute as much to their cities as the parks whose design motifs they ape.

Chicago architect Philip Bess, who in the late 1980s designed a “neighborhood ballpark” to replace the White Sox’ Comiskey Park when club ownership was pushing for public funds to build an urban park similar in design to one in suburban Kansas City, believed that ballparks could be built to accommodate neighborhoods rather than replace them, as Chicago’s own Wrigley Field proves. Bess’ ballpark design, which featured mixed-use buildings surrounding a classically designed ballpark that fit the existing street grid, and preserved the old Comiskey Park diamond as a public park by putting parking lots where they could already be accommodated, ran “against the grain of urban development policy, which is increasingly concerned not with holding together communities but with creating
high-activity 'entertainment zones' that draw suburbanites and tourists back within the city limits.”6 Bess claims that urban ballparks, regardless of their design, are now built to function as “anchors for downtown entertainment zones”, rather than pieces of a functioning urban economic fabric.7

Figure 1: Model for Philip Bess’s Armour Field

Proponents for public funding of private sporting venues often claim that the venues will result in a major positive economic impact on the city, region or district. While this may be somewhat true in the case of major league venues that attract a significant number of patrons from outside the venue’s region, more than one study have concluded that entertainment districts and their constituent attractions simply serve to shift entertainment and leisure dollars away from preexisting venues,

because there is effectively a static amount of money people are willing to spend on entertainment and leisure in a local population, a concept called the “substitution effect”. Minor league sporting events, which typically operate well outside any national media attention, draw significantly fewer spectators from outside their home regions in general. In his book *Major League Losers: The Real Cost of Sports and Who’s Paying For It*, Mark Rosentraub argues that estimates of economic impact presented by pro-ballpark groups routinely overestimate by calculating based on unrealistic multiplier factors, or by lumping together all factors of positive economic impact without accounting for negative impacts. Rosentraub points out that the true economic impact of any project must take into account how much of that impact is the result of the substitution effect, as this cannot be truthfully said to constitute economic growth at all. Nevertheless, ballparks can create a meaningful positive economic impact on a city through two other types of economic activity: first, a venue that attracts visitors from outside of the region who would otherwise not visit or spend as much money in the region, and second, a venue that draws new patrons from within the region who would otherwise leave the region to spend their recreation dollars. As mentioned earlier, major league events are much more capable of attracting these types of patrons on their own than minor league events,

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but this fact also means that minor league venues are better suited as one of many pieces of an entertainment district; a minor league ballpark may not be much of an attraction on its own, but it can be a useful part of a successful entertainment district.

In Field of Schemes: How the Great Stadium Swindle Turns Public Money Into Private Profit, Joanna Cagan and Neil deMause point out the irony of an art installation outside of Cleveland's retro park, Jacobs Field: “In the walkway between Jacobs Field and Gund Arena in downtown Cleveland, a lovely mosaic memorial has been installed. It honors, of all things, the once-thriving urban market that was destroyed in order to make room for the new sports facilities”.10 As with any other single project, no baseball park will singlehandedly revive an ailing downtown. A ballpark cannot provide enough high paying jobs or spinoff development to change the fortunes of a neighborhood, and certainly no minor league park acts solely to attract anyone to move nearby.11 In a report analyzing a failed attempt at bringing a team to Fort Wayne in the late 1980s, Rosentraub and David Swindell note that “minor league teams in smaller cities may well bring real growth to the community, but the overall impact of the team is usually so small that an economic constituency to support the team is difficult to find”.12 Nevertheless, baseball can still be a positive contribution to a city's downtown redevelopment effort if it is implemented

12 Ibid., p. 50
correctly. Projects along the lines of Bess’ “neighborhood ballpark” can potentially provide an improved ballpark experience for tourists and suburbanites while also improving the quality of life of inner city residents. Planners must be wary of claims of success with entertainment-oriented redevelopment projects because, as Cagan and deMause note, “a substantial percentage of the population simply becomes irrelevant when the discussion focuses on economic success”,13 because too often economic success benefits only a small number of powerful people.

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Structure

The bulk of this paper features an examination of three case studies of cities that have seen new minor league ballparks constructed in the central business district. For the sake of diversity, a conscious effort has been made to choose cities of variable size and history; Columbus, Ohio is a state capital and major regional city in which the ballpark is a relatively minor addition to a sports entertainment district that already had the ability to attract visitors to a degree. Dayton, Ohio, is a rust belt city whose economic base has changed dramatically over the last 50 years, and hoped to utilize baseball to effect downtown revitalization. Finally, Bowling Green, Kentucky, a small town until economic and population growth beginning in the 1950s and 60s, hoped to include minor league baseball as part of a major downtown redevelopment project before a variety of problems got in the way. The ballparks profiled were all constructed between 2000 and 2009. Some of these parks predate the start of local redevelopment efforts, while others were additions to plans already underway. As a result, the circumstances behind the construction of each ballpark are unique in the timeline of district development, ensuring that this study examines as wide a variety of circumstances as allowable with three case studies.
Note that the emphasis is placed on the cities themselves rather than the ballparks; the goal is to examine how the ballpark, as just one component of a larger planned commercial district, has contributed, if at all, to the success of that district, and the health of the CBD or the city as a whole. For example, in the early 2000s, after the development of their Gateway District, the city of Cleveland was dubbed by national media America’s “Comeback City”, in spite of a lack of considerable improvement in actual quality of life for residents.¹⁴

Each case study will feature the following structure:

* **General Information:** Information on the construction of the ballpark, as well as a general inventory of the district in which it has been built.

* **Development History:** A description of the methods used to develop both the ballpark and any other revitalization efforts in the district.

* **Design:** A description of the author’s personal thoughts on the experience of attending a game at the ballpark, including its amenities and design, as well as its siting and integration into the surrounding city blocks.

¹⁴ Op. cit., Rosenswieg, D. Rosenswieg provides evidence: despite this huge investment in sports-centered redevelopment, tremendous urban problems remain in Cleveland. In fact, by many standards, they have gotten worse since 1990. City schools are still considered among the worst in the country, and welfare reform of 1996 cost many urban neighborhoods upwards of 17 percent of their total yearly income.

pp. 13-14
Assessment: In which the author arrives at conclusions regarding the success of the ballpark in relation to both its district and its city as a whole. In particular the process by which the park came to be is important in this assessment, insofar as the ultimate goal is to discover the best and worst methods of building a downtown ballpark. Consideration will also be given to the value in branding that is generated by the ballpark/district.
Case Study 1 - Columbus, Ohio

General Information

Ballpark

Huntington Park was constructed from 2007 to 2009 and the Columbus Clippers of the Class-AAA International League played there for the first time in April of 2009. The park was designed by 360 Architecture, a Kansas City based firm that specializes in sporting venues. The cost of construction was approximately $55 million in 2009 dollars. The seating capacity is 10,100. The Clippers play 72 home games between April and September each season, and the park also hosts the Ohio state high school baseball tournament.

District

Huntington Park is located in the Arena District of Columbus, a 75-acre neighborhood bounded by the central business district to the south and east, the

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Scioto River to the west, and Interstate 670 to the north, with the Short North neighborhood beyond it. The district, which was also master-planned by 360 Architecture, derives its name from Nationwide Arena, the indoor sports/events venue opened in 2000 that was the catalyst for the redevelopment of the area. Prior to redevelopment, the area was the site of the former Ohio Penitentiary (the Old Pen) that operated from 1834 to 1983. Other than the arena and the ballpark, the Arena District also includes an open-air music venue, an eleven-screen cinema, eleven office buildings with 1.2 million square feet of office space, four apartment buildings with a total of 600 units, three hotels, and several bars and restaurants.16

Development History

The Arena District came about as the result of several years of attempts by the city and major city players to accomplish two things; first, the revitalization of the northern entry to downtown, second, the attraction of a new major league franchise to Columbus. In 1994 sporting entrepreneur Lamar Hunt took ownership of two of the ten founding clubs of Major League Soccer, the new professional soccer league that would begin play 1996. Hunt placed one in his hometown of Kansas City; the other became the Columbus Crew, and played their first four seasons in Ohio Stadium, the long-time home of Ohio State University football. The Crew represented the first time that the city of Columbus had been home to a top-flight professional sports franchise; albeit in a league that trailed well behind the big four

(NFL, NBA, MLB & NHL) in popularity and exposure. Nevertheless, city backers saw
their opportunity to break into the major professional leagues, and, being a
northern city in a state with no major league hockey team, quickly set their sights on
the National Hockey League. A string of successful downtown and near-downtown
redevelopment projects\(^{17}\) had raised confidence in the plausibility of securing public
funds for a new arena to house a new hockey team.\(^{18}\) The site of the former Ohio
Penitentiary seemed to be the perfect location because of its present
unattractiveness, its easy access to the highway network, and its proximity to both a
revitalizing downtown to the south and a gentrifying neighborhood to the north.
Furthermore, the city already owned the land, and would need to demolish what
remained of the penitentiary due to safety concerns regardless. In addition, Hunt
had placed his new soccer team in Columbus with the hopes of constructing a new
soccer-specific stadium in which his team would play – this was to join the arena in
the new development, both of which were to be built primarily using public funds,
and the total cost of which was approximated at $277 million.\(^{19}\) However, Issue 1,
which was placed on a May 1997 ballot and was estimated to raise $203 million
toward the project as the result of a countywide sales tax hike, was rejected by
voters, putting the attraction of an NHL team in serious jeopardy.

Despite this rejection of the typical major sporting venue development
process, Columbus did get its arena and its major league hockey team. In the months
following the failure of Issue 1, a group of investors headed by Nationwide
Insurance CEO Dimon McFerson and Columbus Dispatch owner John Wolfe put
together a proposal to construct the new arena (now at a cost of approximately
$125 million) on the Old Pen site entirely through private funding. Nationwide,
whose national headquarters are just down the block from the Old Pen site, had
already invested heavily in downtown redevelopment, and McFerson saw the arena
as an opportunity to good to pass up.\textsuperscript{20} The group soon made a deal with the city
regarding use of the land, infrastructure improvements and environmental clean-up
of the site to be paid for by the city, and the lease of nearby land acquired through
eminent domain to the developers.\textsuperscript{21} The developers also secured a property tax

\textsuperscript{20} Op. cit., Curry, T.J., et. al. (86)

Nationwide contributed to the redevelopment [of downtown] by
constructing six of the sixteen major buildings recently added to this part of
the city and by partially financing two others. Including the convention
center, which is just a couple blocks north of the Nationwide corporate
complex, the recent building construction in the area totaled more than $700
million.

\textsuperscript{21} Futty, J. (1997, June 3). “Council Oks Arena Proposal” \textit{The Columbus Dispatch}.
Retrieved December, 2011 from
exemption, however, they agreed to apply a ticket surcharge that would be dedicated to the city public school system.

While the process in which the Arena District got its start was unconventional when it comes to sports venue construction, it was likely the more advantageous result for the city from a redevelopment perspective. The original publicly funded proposal was for the construction of two sporting venues and little else, with backers taking a “build it, and they will come” stance regarding spin-off development. McFerson and Wolfe, approaching the development both as private investors and Columbus-area residents, took the opposite approach, planning for more than just an arena, but an entire district that would be master-planned with office and residential space that would help the new district act more as an extension of downtown rather than one or two buildings in a sea of parking. The size of the Old Pen site further ensured that if the new district was successful, there would still be room to add new development in the same vein, including Huntington Park, nearly ten years after the district was first constructed.

While the city did not receive its first major league franchise until the 1990s, the people of Columbus had proven themselves strong supporters of minor league sports over the previous century. Support for the city’s baseball teams has been particularly consistent; the city has hosted a minor league baseball club in all but six years since 1900. Since the resurgence of minor league baseball in the late 80s, the

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Clippers have been among the top teams in attendance in the nation year in and year out.\(^{23}\) From the 1930s until 2008 Columbus baseball was played in Cooper Stadium, in the Franklinton neighborhood about three miles from downtown. The park was renovated in 1977 upon the return of baseball to the city, and continued as the main outdoor sports venue in the city until the 2000s, by which time the club began arguing that the facility was becoming obsolete. The club was presented with multiple areas of the city in which to build a new park, including the Brewery District and River South, both south of downtown, and Easton, ten miles northwest of central Columbus.\(^{24}\) The club settled on a parcel in the Arena District both because of its advantageous location near the downtown employment center and its proximity to Nationwide Arena. Additionally, and uniquely amongst professional sports teams, the Clippers are owned by Franklin County; this gave the club unique leverage in choosing a location. The club chose 360 Architecture to design the park in order to create some degree of uniformity with the older part of the district development immediately to the east. The majority of the $55 million construction cost was raised through corporate naming rights to just about everything in the park, amounting to nearly $40 million – the county also received a $7 million grant from the state, and they expected ticket and concession revenues, estimated at $3

For many years the Clippers have drawn half a million fans per season, a gate size that franchises in many other cities envy

million a year, to cover the remainder of the cost.\textsuperscript{25} Uniquely, the construction was completed both on time and on budget.

**Design**

**Ballpark**

Huntington Park was designed to ape the trend started in the early 1990s with the construction of Camden Yards in Baltimore; that of the so-called retro ballpark. The design includes elements that serve as physical tributes to classic ballparks; the right field wall is a miniature version of Fenway Park’s Green Monster, and small street-level gaps in the outfield wall allow passing pedestrians to get a glimpse of the game, \textit{á la} Ebbets Field. Curiously, the park also pays homage to Camden Yards itself in the form of what appears to be an old red brick warehouse building that has been incorporated into the concourse and holds seating and concessions, though, in a twist that speaks to the questionable authenticity that the retro ballpark trend has invoked, the building was actually purpose built to be incorporated into the park\textsuperscript{26}. The park also features a full concourse with many dining options, from standard ballpark fare to bar-b-que from a local restaurant to summery accoutrements like salads and sandwiches. These features bring variety to the ballgame experience for spectators. There is also a notable variety in the ways


\textsuperscript{26} Op. cit., Schnacke, K.
fans can view the game, with more types of seating than in any other single ballpark the author has visited, including major league parks. Other than the standard suites, boxes and bleachers, Huntington Park incorporates seating on the third floor of the warehouse building, as well as a terrace area that hangs from the concourse ceiling some 25 feet above the lower grandstand down the right foul line. There is also unique variety that comes with that most egalitarian of minor league offerings, the general admission ticket – spectators can choose from several dining areas with picnic tables, a bar-like counter with stools that sits atop the mini-Green Monster, or those who prefer to stand have the option of doing so along a rail behind any section of grandstand on the foul lines. Whereas most minor league ballparks fill their outfield with large swaths of sloped lawn that acts as the bulk of general admission seating, Huntington Park has minimized the lawn in favor of accommodating general admission patrons throughout the park. In this way, families can choose the lawn and let their children play without the area becoming crowded with nearly every general admission patron. This seating variety also encourages patrons to wander around the park during the game, reading info plaques about the game of baseball, examining statues and historic items about the game in Columbus scattered throughout the park, and perusing the gift shop. The thought that went into the design of this park ensures that fans can come many times each season and have a unique experience during each visit. Huntington Park was well received by the public and the baseball industry; the park won multiple Ballpark of the Year awards
in its inaugural season, in the process beating out both the new Yankee Stadium and the Mets’ Citi Field\textsuperscript{27}.

\begin{figure}[ht]
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\caption{This building looks like an old warehouse, but it was purpose-built to house club offices and seating.}
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\textsuperscript{27} Op. cit., Schnacke, K.
Figure 3: A variety of seating types and vantage points are offered at Huntington Park.

Figure 4: Huntington Park full on a Friday night.
While Huntington Park was built to compliment the existing architectural and design motifs of the older portions of the Arena District, its location and surrounding land uses make it clear that it is a new addition. Today the ballpark feels disconnected from much of the district as a result of Neil Avenue and a full city block of surface parking that separate it from Nationwide Arena. Since the original master-planned district extends almost entirely to the North and East of the arena, the ballpark feels very much like the edge. Additional buildings, mostly residential, are planned to help fill in this gap. To the west of the park development opportunities are likely constrained as a result of a railroad junction, Interstate 670 and the Olentangy River. While the Nationwide Boulevard Corridor, which acts as the main street for the district, is relatively densely developed, and very attractive, there are currently few businesses within eyeshot of the ballpark’s main entrance. Typically games will conclude at 10 pm or later, and the author found little in the way of further entertainment options at that hour during his visit, which happened to be on a Friday night.

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Assessment

It was evident from the game the author attended and further explorations of the district that same night that Huntington Park, and the Arena District in general, appeal primarily to suburban demographics. The overwhelming majority of spectators were white despite Columbus being ⅓ minority, and the large parking lots adjacent to the park were filled, creating quite a jam at the conclusion of the
game. Once the game ended the sidewalks cleared quickly, and soon the district was all but deserted, with the only pedestrians being conference attendees at some of the massive hotels roughly ½ mile down Nationwide Boulevard. It was disappointing to see how a place with such a visually appealing urban design was unable to retain such a large visiting contingency. Perhaps the atmosphere of the district will improve as more residential units are added, however, as most of these are planned for the northeastern-most section of the district, north of the railroad tracks and adjacent to the convention center, it seems unlikely that these will generate significant foot-traffic along Nationwide Boulevard. This must be considered at least a partial failure for the district from the planner’s perspective, as it has not been able to bring about significant change in the way the downtown area is used.

The district is more successful from an economic development perspective, and the city should be satisfied with its gains in localized economic activity, as well as its enhanced national recognition, considering its investment. The city’s major contributions to the project were in land donation and reduced property taxes for the new owners, and a 2008 report calculates the net cost to the city at $36 million, not counting lost future tax revenues.29 However, this limited public impact came as a result of specific circumstances that cannot be duplicated in many smaller cities. Columbus happens to be home to a major insurance and real estate corporation that had a history of local investment, and the project was initiated in the hopes of

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29 John Glenn School of Public Affairs. (July 2008). Assessment of the Gross Economic Impact of the Arena District on Greater Columbus.
landing a major league franchise; it is likely that such an extensive development plan would not have been implemented for a new Clippers ballpark alone. In fact, one cannot help but question how much the arena and ballpark can be considered responsible for the increased fiscal impact overall. Rosentraub showed that payroll for the professional sports sector constitutes less than 1 percent of total wages in the country’s largest cities, and that much of that money leaves the local economy in the hands of players and coaches who reside elsewhere.\(^{30}\) In fact, it is likely that corporate offices constitute the greatest portion of the economic activity in the district, even if the sporting venues are the “anchors”. The 2008 study of the district notes that the amount of office space in the district grew 71 percent from 2003 to 2008, to a total of 1.1 million square feet.\(^{31}\) The report also shows the average wage of a district worker in 2006 to be over $64,000, indicating that ballpark employment, the majority of which is low wage, is not a major component of the workforce.\(^{32}\) In 2009 there were a total of 37 establishments in the Arena District’s zip code that were classified as “arts, entertainment, and recreation”, constituting just 1.5 percent of the total number of establishments.\(^{33}\) While the Arena District has been economically successful, the credit should not be placed squarely on its feature attractions, but rather on the office employers who were attracted by the new development. This fact may help to explain the number of closed storefronts in the evening; these businesses cater primarily to daytime district workers, rather than

\(^{30}\) Op. cit., Rosentraub, M., pp. 142-143  
\(^{31}\) Op. cit., John Glenn School of Public Affairs, p. 11  
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 10  
\(^{33}\) U.S. Census Bureau
evening sports event spectators. In this way the Arena District breaks the mold of the entertainment center archetype by including more traditional central business district uses. One of the most crucial goals for the district moving forward should be marrying housing and amenities in the district with the needs of district workers. If an effort is made to attract workers to live in the district itself, Columbus will have gone a long way in reconnecting downtown to some of its surrounding neighborhoods.

Figure 7: The Arena District is beautifully designed, but needs more residents and amenities to bring it to life.

In a large development such as the Arena District, in a city as large as Columbus, Huntington Park exists as a relatively minor component of the district. The Ohio State University has always been the sporting powerhouse of the city, with
the football team averaging 105,000 spectators, 103 percent occupancy, in Ohio Stadium in 2010. The Clippers tend to draw about even with the hockey team next door; with per game attendance at about 81 percent of capacity for each, though this translates to nearly 15,000 per game for the hockey team, and just over 8,000 for the Clippers. Nevertheless, the ballpark has proven to be a successful local relocation, and the situation provides one lesson on sports development in particular. Cagan, DeMause and Rosentraub all lament the virtual monopolies that major leagues have developed over the decades, as well as the power over the individual member clubs and owners therein. They note that no major league franchise is publicly owned, and furthermore, no league will allow private ownership because of the risk of exposure (especially of financial records) that would be necessary if that were to occur. Fortunately, minor leagues typically do not prohibit public ownership of franchises, a fact that Franklin County has taken advantage of. Public ownership of sports clubs tends to result in a more fiscally responsible management of all aspects of operation, from payrolls to the facilities. It ensures that municipalities will not be held hostage by club owners who threaten to move the team if their demands for a new facility are not met, and it gives a more direct and tangible ownership of the team to residents. In the case of Huntington

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36 The sole exception being the Green Bay Packers football team, which is publicly owned and operated by a board of directors made up of club shareholders.
Park, public ownership facilitated the process of site scouting and acquisition, and ensured that construction costs were a matter of public record. Since the minor leagues have always dealt with high rates of franchise turnover and movement, and are not immune from financial manipulation by opportunistic owners, a city looking to attract a minor league club or ensure that their long-time club stays put would be wise to consider public ownership.
Case Study 2 - Dayton, Ohio

General Information

Ballpark

Fifth Third Field was constructed in 1999 to serve as the home field of the Dayton Dragons Class-A Midwest League baseball club. The franchise was founded in 1988, and had spent its entire history in Rockford, Illinois. Before moving to Dayton for the 2000 season. The park was designed by HNTB Architects Associated, Inc., of Kansas City, Missouri. This park should not be confused with other minor league ballparks whose naming rights are also owned by Fifth Third Bank, including Fifth Third Field in Toledo, OH, Fifth Third Ballpark in Comstock Park, MI, and Fifth Third Bank Ballpark in Kane County, IL. Official seating capacity for the park is 7,230. The Dragons play 70 home games between April and September each season, and the ballpark also hosts other events including concerts and some games of the Dayton Dutch Lions professional soccer club.
District

Fifth Third Field is located in the northeastern portion of downtown Dayton, approximately 150 yards from the confluence of the Great Miami and Mad Rivers and the RiverScape MetroPark. Downtown Dayton is home to 2,000 residents and 24,000 workers,\(^{38}\) and offers most of the city’s arts and cultural venues, including five theatres, ballet, opera, orchestra, one cinema, 13 museums and galleries, 40 restaurants and 30 bars and clubs.\(^{39}\) The city and the Downtown Dayton Partnership completed the Greater Downtown Dayton Plan, which expands the borders of downtown and lays out goals and strategies for residential and economic growth, in 2010.\(^{40}\) According to the plan, the Greater Downtown area is home to 42,000 workers and 20,000 residents.\(^{41}\)

Development History

Dayton experienced a precipitous decline in their downtown in the post-war period that was similar to many other mid-size midwestern cities. It only began to escape these doldrums around the turn of the century. Coincidentally perhaps, downtown’s lean years parallel the decades in which the city did not host a minor

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\(^{39}\) Ibid.


league baseball team. After the Dayton Indians called it quits in the mid-1950s, a succession of owners of the major league Cincinnati Reds, who play just 52 miles south of Dayton, exercised their territorial rights to prohibit competition within a 75-mile radius, ensuring that for many years Dayton would be the largest metropolitan area in the country without a minor league team. This prohibition was finally lifted in the late 1990s, and by the end of the decade at least three different ownership groups were interested in bringing a franchise to Dayton. The winners were the Mandalay Entertainment Group, a Los Angeles based entertainment management company that already operated several minor league clubs, who purchased a team in Rockford, Illinois in 1999 and agreed to move them to the Dayton area, dependent upon local government financing the construction of a new ballpark. While the ownership group was relatively ambivalent about the location of the ballpark, prominent city officials pushed for a downtown location in hopes that it would spur new development. The public and local media were initially skeptical about the ability of baseball to lure Daytonians back downtown; questions were raised about safety before and after games and a lack of parking. The city argued that a ballpark in the other proposed location, suburban Trotwood, would generate an atmosphere much like the indoor Hara Arena it would neighbor; one of an isolated sporting experience for patrons, and little direct interaction or benefit to the immediate area. The city was convinced a park located in the Northeastern edge

of downtown, amidst mostly empty warehouses, would not only attract many of the area baseball fans who would otherwise travel to Cincinnati for games, but also businesses to a downtown that had been suffering from large amounts of vacant office space. The downtown ballpark was approved in 1998, and construction began in 1999.

Construction costs totaled approximately $29 million, and the city boasts that no local tax increases were needed. City officials worked creatively to find funding options, and were helped by local and state mechanisms in place at the time. The city opened a $12.2 million general obligation bond, which was refinanced in 2009 to drop the interest rate more than 50 percent. $4 million were derived from the state’s related Economic Development & Government Equity (ED/GE) funds, which set aside a portion of sales tax from each municipality in the county for economic development projects. The city cleverly partnered with the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority (RTA), allowing them to put $2 million from the RTA directly, and $3.3 million of federal transportation grants, toward construction of a public plaza with bus shelters and bike racks outside the stadium, as well as

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improved park access for disabled persons.\textsuperscript{46} This was particularly smart; although the city owns both the ballpark and the plaza in front of the main entrance, it leases them to the team separately. With the ballpark leased at $9,000 per year and the plaza at $1,000 per game, the result is an effective lease of almost $80,000 annually.\textsuperscript{47} Finally, Mandalay contributed $8 million to finish off the construction cost.

Choosing to partner with the RTA on the ballpark project ensured that investment would be made to areas outside the park as well. The ballpark project also spurred the development of the RiverScape MetroPark, located across Monument Avenue north of the ballpark. The riverside park was completed in 2001 and constituted the first public access to the Great Miami River since 1913.\textsuperscript{48} In this way the ballpark has undoubtedly had a major effect on downtown redevelopment that very well may not have occurred if city officials had chosen the Trotwood park site (see Figure 3). Part of this success can be explained by the tremendous support that the Dayton Dragons baseball team has enjoyed from its inception. The Dragons sold all of their season tickets before they had played a single game, and have racked up over 800 consecutive sellouts in their twelve seasons so far. While minor league baseball may be minor in terms of direct economic impact, the impact of


\textsuperscript{47} Op. cit., O’Neal, J.

\textsuperscript{48} Op. cit., Freid, B.
Consistently having over 8,000 fans downtown seventy days a year cannot be underestimated.

![Figure 8: from Dayton Daily News]

**Design**

**Ballpark**

The Dragons have succeeded in maintaining consumer loyalty for over a decade not through flashy ballpark design, or abundance of increasingly absurd gimmick nights, or even with consistently good baseball (the club made the Midwest League playoffs for the first time in 2011). Their success is a result of attention to
customer service in and out of the ballpark, implementation of a variety of types of
entertainment during games, and fan-friendly amenities and prices. Having said
that, Fifth Third field is uniquely designed for a Class-A ballpark. When constructed
it was the only Class-A ballpark with an upper deck. The nonsymmetrical layout of
its playing field, which, unlike those retro-chic ballparks in some cities, was
necessary to fit the site without eliminating any streets, give it a unique charm. Also
unique is the clear emphasis of standard seating over suites and boxes, which is
evident both in the design of the park itself (suites and boxes are relegated to the
upper level) and the attitude of the staff, which focuses on selling partial season
ticket packages that are more manageable for casual fans than expensive and
unwieldy full season options. And since so many season tickets are sold each year, a
day at the ballpark in Dayton is more of a community gathering than just a ballgame.
Perhaps most unique is the wrought-iron fence that surrounds the park beyond the
outfield, where the concourse is at street level. While the architects who designed
this feature into the park surely were not expecting years of sellouts, the fence
allows fans that either missed out on a ticket or cannot afford a game to watch for
free. Fifth Third Field exhibits a kind of egalitarianism that recalls the nostalgia we
as a society feel for the early days of professional baseball much more effectively
than the carefully orchestrated faux-nostalgia generated by retro ballparks. In
aesthetics, Fifth Third Field may not necessarily be considered retro, but its specific
design elements, along with its expert operation, prove that when it comes to
providing a high quality sporting experience, the details trump the looks.
Fifth Third Field is similar to Huntington Park in many ways, featuring pieces of Dayton baseball history along the concourse walls, providing a variety of seating and standing options for General Admission patrons and a wide variety of concession options. The team keeps the crowd occupied between innings with a variety of fan contests, mascot giveaways and other hijinks. The quality of the ballpark experience is high, and it is easy to see why the club is at the tops of minor league attendance every year.

Figure 9: The Dayton Dragons have enjoyed sold-out games for over a decade.
Figure 10: The street-level concourse in the outfield allows some fans, called "knotholers", to watch the game for free.

Figure 11: Fifth Third Field was built in a warehouse district. Some of the buildings are still active.
District

Fifth Third Field benefits from its location adjacent to the RiverScape MetroPark; a beautifully designed linear riverside park that is home to a variety of activities, including general river access, paddleboat rentals, a fountain that residents can cool off in, gardened promenades, and in the summer hosts a free concert series. A similarly landscaped corridor extends from the plaza in front of the ballpark to the south, leading to a public park. On all other sides the ballpark is surrounded by warehouses, some of which are still functioning, and some of which are now subject to potential redevelopment concepts.49 The bulk of the downtown business district is located along Main Street, two blocks west of the ballpark. Since very little parking was set aside for the ballpark exclusively, many businesses and churches in these two blocks offer up their own lots as game day parking, and the author observed a majority of game patrons walking along these streets after the game. While there is little economic activity around the ballpark proper that caters to the fan (there is one bar that overlooks the park beyond the outfield), the proximity to the major downtown corridor, and the multiple connections available between these two activity centers, make up for this. Figure 3 shows that the largest of the development projects that have taken place over the last decade have not been in the immediate vicinity of the ballpark, however, projects such as the one

referenced earlier may help to attract private enterprise that will complement the public investment in the ballpark and nearby public spaces.

Figure 12: RiverScape MetroPark offers access to the Great Miami River and many beautiful places to enjoy nice weather.

Assessment

If nothing else, the construction of Fifth Third Field signaled the beginning of a fresh series of downtown development projects both public and private for which the downtown is absolutely better off. Problems, of course, still remain; the ballpark did not change the fact that downtown Dayton is home to a surplus of office space that makes its high rent prices, fourth highest in the Dayton area, according to one real estate data firm, uncompetitive. A city like Dayton, whose economic base has

changed so drastically since the post-war era, may find it necessary to right-size downtown office space by encouraging conversion of outdated buildings to other uses. In particular, the downtown housing market continues grow; vacancy rates stood at 5 percent in the first half of 2011, even as new buildings are being completed.\(^5\) Newly developed downtown condominiums are now selling at rates similar to single-family homes in the city.\(^5\) As a result, the downtown Dayton census tract was the only tract in the city to show population growth through the last decade.\(^5\) In recent years the city and the Downtown Dayton Partnership have enacted programs intended to retain existing downtown businesses and bolster tourism. The development of the ballpark and other improvement are certainly at least partially responsible for this success.

Dayton found success through minor league baseball for a variety of reasons. They chose to work with an ownership group that had a proven track record of success in marketing the sport in a crowded sports area (Dayton is also home to minor league basketball, hockey and soccer teams, and University of Dayton sports have strong followings as well) rather than local ownership groups that were less experienced with sports management. Mandalay operates a ball club that retains its customers by focusing on high quality customer service and entertainment for

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reasonable prices, and as a result, the Dragons have become not only the premier sports ticket in town, but among the most popular in the nation. The city thus experienced real economic growth in the entertainment sector by retaining local residents who would have traveled to Cincinnati for baseball if the park were not built. The result for downtown was an instant injection of over 500,000 downtown visitors each season throughout the summer months; mostly Daytonians who had not been downtown regularly in decades. These visitors arrived not just to a new ballpark, but new public plazas and parks that were made possible through cooperation with local and state agencies, all of which have made downtown an attractive residential district as well. Bringing baseball to downtown Dayton has succeeded because of good club management and the acknowledgement that the ballpark should be just one component of a redevelopment strategy. The city of Dayton invested in improving the livability, attractiveness and connectivity of downtown to lure visitors and residents back to the area, and have mostly succeeded in this aspect.

The direct economic impact of Fifth Third Field and the Dragons is less notable in terms of raw figures than it is in terms of launching a renewed interest in downtown development across multiple sectors that are not necessarily related to baseball at all. Fifth Third Field showed that the city was ready to reinvest in downtown, and the instant and sustained success that the team has enjoyed from the community changed perceptions about the entire district.

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Case Study 3 – Bowling Green, Kentucky

General Information

Ballpark

Bowling Green Ballpark has been the home of the Class-A Midwest League Bowling Green Hot Rods since 2009, when the team was moved to Bowling Green from Columbus, Georgia. Bowling Green has no significant history of minor league baseball because of its historically small size; a team called the Barons operated for four seasons in the Class-D Kentucky-Illinois-Tennessee League from 1939-1942. Bowling Green Ballpark was designed by DLR Group, an international architecture firm with several minor league and college baseball parks under its belt, and cost $28 million. The seating capacity of the park is 4,559. The Hot Rods play 70 home games each season, and the ballpark also hosts charity events, orchestral concerts and some Western Kentucky University baseball games.

District

Bowling Green Ballpark is located at the northern corner of downtown Bowling Green, two blocks away from the center of the district, Fountain Square.
Attractions and amenities in or near downtown include the river walk along the
Barren River, the Southern Kentucky Performing Arts Center (SKyPAC), museums,
and several independent stores and restaurants. The campus of Western Kentucky
University (WKU) is 1.5 miles southwest of downtown.

Development History

What began as an ambitious public/private partnership plan to transform the city
from downtown to the edge of the Western Kentucky University campus was slowly
neutered as a result of unforeseen circumstances. While the ballpark and several
other projects have been completed so far, the results on the ground pale in
comparison to the plans first presented to city and county officials in 2005.

Downtown redevelopment began in the early 2000s with the revitalization of
Fountain Square, the city’s oldest public space. One of the prime catalysts of a new
round of development was downtown restaurant owner Rick Kelley, who became
chairman of “Play Ball! ’05”, and assembled a group of investors and developers
interested in bringing minor league baseball to Bowling Green. The opportunity
came in 2007, when New Hampshire Fisher Cats ball club owner Art Solomon
displayed interest in purchasing a second club and moving them to Bowling Green.55
The group developed a massive project including not just a ballpark, but also an
upscale hotel, a parking garage with mixed-use street frontage, and additional

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owner-makes-the-pitch/article_205501e9-544b-57ef-b181-245f0a633499.html
residential and commercial development spread over six blocks of downtown. The plan would also incorporate projects that had already been in the works, like the Circus Square Park and SKyPAC. This plan was expected to constitute an approximately $250 million investment, to be paid for partially by private interests and publicly through a new Tax Increment Finance (TIF) district to encompass downtown. Project promoters estimated that bonds issued to cover the public investment (of which the ballpark was to constitute approximately $25 million) would cost $200 million to pay off over the course of 30 years, while the TIF district would earn $231 million over the same period.56 The city and county quickly approved bonds to start the first phase of the project with promises that taxes would not be raised for residents or businesses, and that, since bonds were to be issued by a nonprofit corporation, any problems that might arise in the future would not effect the city’s credit rating.57 It was not long before the developers began making changes to their plans however.

The first significant change came in early 2008, shortly before the deadline for commitment to the construction of the ballpark, when developers requested that the city sell $25 million in bonds to back up the project.58 Critics saw this as an

affirmation of their apprehensions about the project as a whole, but the city and county approved the allocation after the development group assured them that while formal commitments could not be made by all of the investing parties, there was enough interest for $150 million in projects.59 Meanwhile the details of many individual pieces of the project remained uncertain; the development group could not confirm whether there would be one parking garage or two, or how much WKU had agreed to invest in projects near their campus. Nevertheless, ballpark construction began in June of 2008, funded by the city/county $25 million bond sale.60

Bowling Green Ballpark was close enough to complete in time for the new team, dubbed the Hot Rods after the city’s Corvette manufacturing facility, to start playing there in April of 2009. However, much of the remainder of the ever-changing downtown development was on complete hold after the nationwide economic collapse of August 2008 made new bond sales impossible. In an attempt to increase the chances of attracting enough development to remain at the highest tier of TIF district ($200 million is the minimum new tax collection for the highest tier in Kentucky, which allows a maximum 30 year length61), the city more than doubled

the size of the district, from 106 to 277 acres. The city and developers tried to use creative funding channels for new construction; builders of a parking garage originally intended to be open before the end of the Hot Rods first season secured New Market Tax Credits by taking out a series of loans to be swapped between two development corporations, the county economic development authority, a local bank and several investment funds, before concluding that the expected parking problems the ballpark would create were unfounded, and indefinitely postponing the garage altogether.

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Design

Ballpark

There is little distinctive or particularly unique about Bowling Green Ballpark. It features an unremarkable red brick façade at the main gate, but no notable architectural details, rendering the facility to look akin to a suburban high school more than anything else (Ballpark Digest describes it as looking “like something lifted from a WPA-era facility”\textsuperscript{65}). While it will never win any awards for beauty, it must be kept in mind that it was intended to be a small part of a large development spanning downtown, which ideally would have included other

signature structures. Bowling Green Ballpark is utilitarian, but functional, and provides a comfortable ballgame experience. The venue has many similarities to others designed by DLR Group for Class-A clubs; an upper deck for suites and boxes and an open concourse that has a view of the field. Like many Class-A parks the concourse here does not wrap around the entire field; while this can make the park feel cluttered during sellouts because of the subsequent poor circulation, it was necessary because of the size of the site. Bowling Green Ballpark lacks much of the variety in seating and concession options that are often present at parks in higher classifications.

Figure 15: Part of the outfield wall bows inward to accommodate the road just beyond the wall.

Figure 14: Open bullpens allow fans to interact with players in ways that are rarely permitted at major league parks.
District

Bowling Green Ballpark was built in a nondescript corner of downtown Bowling Green. Practically all of the new developments that have been completed since the park was built are within walking distance, although it is not obvious that these even exist when attending a ballgame, as there is no signage to direct visitors to attractions. When the author visited, a gravel parking lot occupied the entire block adjacent to the park on the southeast side; this has since become the site of the long-delayed parking garage. Before the lot was started, free on-street parking throughout much of downtown was utilized by game patrons, and the author observed that restaurants and bars within several blocks of downtown were busy both before and after the game. The new parking garage was likely necessary as a result of the recent opening of SKyPAC, but one wonders to what degree those restaurants and bars were aided simply by having ballpark patrons parking in front of and walking by their establishments on game nights. The city expects development to fill some of the empty spaces between the ballpark and Fountain Square.

Assessment

As of early 2012, the year when the original development was slated for completion, few of the projects included in that plan have been built. Of the projects that have been completed the largest were planned and at least partially funded before the 2007 plan was introduced, such as Circus Square Park, which opened in
the summer of 2008, and SKyPAC, which opened in March of 2012. Whether the difficulties faced by proponents of downtown redevelopment heretofore are the result of noncommittal developers, poor timing relative to the economic downturn, a lack of shrewdness in local government, or a combination of the three, projects continue to materialize. The long-delayed 820-space parking garage, along with another by the WKU campus half its size, are finally underway, and while the mixed-use “wrapping” on each garage is still planned, it will be added incrementally, one side at a time, as funding becomes available. Additional projects are planned, and the city now expects to reach its development goal. The district must show $150 million of new investment by the end of 2014 to access the bulk of the money earned by the TIF district. The issue for the city and county now is how much money will be earned, and if it will be enough to help them earn or break even on their effort. The projects that have been completed so far have been more heavily funded publicly than originally planned for, and much of it has been in institutional uses rather than commercial, meaning that the district may not earn significantly

increased returns on the most important component of TIF earnings, the local occupational tax.\textsuperscript{69}

Although the ballpark likely would not have been built if it had not been included as part of the original development plan, it and the team that plays there have nevertheless been reasonably successful. Club owner Art Solomon had a history of success with his team in Manchester, New Hampshire, who saw attendance rise every year of his ownership, and committed to being involved in community events and local nonprofits and charities.\textsuperscript{70} The Hot Rods have seen similar community involvement, and consistent patronage at games; on the back of a good season on the field, the club set a record for attendance in 2011.\textsuperscript{71}

Until 2014 the city and county will be responsible for paying off the cost of ballpark construction; about $1.6 million each year.\textsuperscript{72} The true success of the development will only be known when, or if, the majority of TIF funding is released. It is clear that the local officials should have waited for stronger commitments from developers before devoting local money to any projects. Furthermore, the use of the TIF, an already fairly controversial funding mechanism (although Kentucky law prohibits one of the most controversial components by ensuring that money

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Op. cit., Bowling Green Ballpark [webpage].
destined for school funding may not be held\textsuperscript{73}, was poorly implemented in this situation considering the uncertain nature of much of the development plan.

\textsuperscript{73} Kent. Rev. Stat. Title IX. Ch. 65 § 490 (2011).
Recommendations

While the direct links between sporting venue development and economic impact on a city appear to be tenuous at best, minor league ballparks can still prove to be a boon to an ailing downtown. As best illustrated in Dayton, public investment in a ballpark can signal to business owners and residents that downtown is worthy of their attention once more. In their book *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes: The Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Stadiums*, Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist argue for a greater consideration of the value of hosting professional sports beyond direct economic benefits, writing that “the cultural importance of major league team sports in American society most assuredly exceeds its economic significance as a business”.

Noll & Zimbalist compare the value of a local team to that of units in the National Park System that have the potential to be highly productive economically if developed, but are preserved because they provide to the public an inherent value that, though unquantifiable, is widely accepted to be greater than its economic

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worth. Rosentraub also notes that “the physical value placed on the facilities used for games is what makes sports part of the social capital of a city”. Though minor league teams do not enjoy the same level of public awareness that major league teams enjoy, the strong and deeply rooted ties between professional sports of any stripe and American culture, along with baseball’s connotations as the national pastime and America’s native game, ensure that the sport represents a point of pride for many communities of all sizes across the nation. For some baseball fans the satisfaction of living in a town with a “home team” is justification enough for public investment in a ballpark, and any economic benefits that may result in the form of jobs or spinoff development are simply the icing on the cake. The number of individuals espousing this view may have dwindled over the years of the recession, but the prestige of professional sports will continue to be hard to resist for many Americans for whom watching and participating in sport has been a major part of their lives. Team and league representatives have also argued in defense of public subsidies by noting the differences between the majors and the minors; minor league clubs, unable to rely on player name recognition or consistent quality of baseball year-in and year-out, are less able to fund their own ballpark.

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75 Ibid.

According to federal officials, the primary benefits of the National Park System are recreation for visitors and conservation of places of outstanding historical importance or natural beauty. Likewise, local governments invest in parks primarily to provide amenities and recreational benefits for their constituents.

p.56

construction/improvements. However, as the minors have grown in popularity over the last two decades, teams have found new ways of attracting both fans and sponsors that may make this claim suspect.

A downtown ballpark is certainly not the right choice for every municipality however. Each city that faces a question of public investment in a sporting venue must consider the factors of cost and expected gains to be made. This is particularly true of cities that already host teams in older venues, or more suburban locations. Unless the team is moving from one municipality to another in the same region, much of the apparent economic gain of a new stadium will actually be little more than a shift in spending from one neighborhood or district to another. Municipalities must also pay attention to how successful the franchise has been recently in the location they wish to leave. As Robert Baade points out in his 1994 study of the economic impacts of major league sporting venues, “cities should recognize that building stadiums for mediocre teams will probably add little to fan support beyond the short run”. For ball clubs that are already only a minor attraction in a region, a multi-million dollar investment in a new stadium may not be a wise use of funds or potentially valuable downtown real estate.

Municipalities considering public investment in ballpark construction or renovation can learn from the successes and failures of cities that have gone

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Max Schumacher of the Indianapolis Indians contends that minor league teams lack the resources to build their own parks. The minors, in his view, are closer to nonprofit enterprises, like museums and libraries.

through the process already. The cities discussed in this paper can offer up many lessons that other municipalities can consider.

Consider Local Public Ownership

Irresponsible or inexperienced ownership groups can doom a minor league team before the first pitch if they are insensitive to the culture of their community. In 2001 the Shreveport Captains came under new ownership that proceeded to drop the team’s name, which had been in place for over 30 years, and adopt the name Swamp Dragons. Fan backlash was so great that attendance dipped severely over the following season, and the new owners moved the club to Frisco, Texas after the 2002 season. Local private ownership should be able to avoid this type of problem, but an owner or owners who buy a team without understanding the complexities of operating a professional sports franchise can find themselves losing money within the first few years, or even losing interest and looking to sell the team to the highest bidder, without regard for city investments. Ostensibly public ownership of the local club should be more capable of understanding how the team fits into the local culture, and, unless they also have difficulties managing their public responsibilities and assets, should have the ability to successfully manage, or delegate management, responsibly. As discussed with the Columbus Clippers, public ownership also provides a level of transparency that is not typically present with privately owned

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clubs, and also facilitates the use of public funding for facility construction and maintenance.

Utilize Creative Sources of Funding

The city of Dayton was able to tap into local and federal transportation funding for their ballpark by partnering with the local public transportation authority. Although the construction of sports venues seems to have little involvement with public transportation, the city realized that public spending on a ballpark would be more palatable to residents if it were considered part of a more familiar public investment; in this case, a new public transit hub nearby. Because of their willingness to partner with another, seemingly unrelated government agency, the city tapped into an additional funding stream, and a ballpark that is accessible not just for suburban fans, but for public transit using urbanites as well. The city of Bowling Green implemented a TIF district to help fund their ballpark, and while their success in using this approach has yet to be seen, the TIF can be used by cities that are confident in the ability of their new development to attract new tax revenues to the district.

Cities can try to get creative in searching for funding, but before committing any money to a ballpark project they should be sure that the team is willing to contribute to the costs in some way. Like any other investment, sports venue construction constitutes a risk, and it should be a risk shared between every group poised to benefit from its success, or be damaged by its failure. Since sports
franchises almost always increase in value when they move into a new facility it is only logical that they should contribute to the investment that will result in such an immediate benefit to ownership. Any city that fully finances a sporting venue is placing an unfair amount of risk on the backs of its constituency.

*A Ballpark Cannot Revitalize a District Alone*

The sporting venue has been, and continues to be, promoted to the public in the same manner as urban revitalization efforts of the past such as urban renewal, pedestrian-only shopping streets, convention centers, and festival markets; as an instant solution to a district’s economic woes. We know that this is rarely the case; major single-structure projects that fail to consider their surroundings or make meaningful connections to their district or to residents are more likely to be seen as white elephants in the long run. Today this type of development is more common in suburban sporting venues than the downtown variety. Any sporting venue, just like any cinema, concert hall or farmer’s market, is only active a certain number of days each year, and can only reasonably expect to attract people during these days. Successful ballpark developments are most often those that are just one part of a plan to create a variety of uses, ensuring a flow of visitors and residents that is not dependent upon special events. Successfully revitalizing a downtown means more than attracting suburbanites to visit half a dozen evenings each summer; it means attracting new employers and residents, and providing a wide array of amenities desirable to both of these demographics. The ballpark should be considered one of
these complimentary amenities, not a singular engine of large-scale economic change.

**Consider Team and League Stability**

Mark Rosentraub has written on many occasions about how major leagues artificially limit the number of teams in their leagues, forcing cities to compete over new or relocated franchises by offering up increasingly larger subsidies to team owners.\(^{80}\) While the classification system of minor league baseball ensures that there are many teams that fit in cities of varying sizes, the limited number of affiliated teams (each major league club has five minor league teams) does affect cities looking to attract or hold onto their clubs. The increasing stability present throughout affiliated minor league baseball also means that there is less relocation today than there was during the minors’ lean years prior to the 1990s. The alternative to competing with other cities for one of a limited supply of affiliated teams lies in the independent leagues, although since they are not guaranteed by affiliation with the majors, member teams are far more volatile, and since they usually operate on more limited budgets than affiliated minor league teams, they often request public subsidy from municipalities as well. On the other hand, independent teams have found consistent success in some markets. Any city

considering hosting an independent club must seriously consider the stability of the ownership and the league before committing any public funds toward a facility.
Conclusion

Each of the cities discussed in this paper pursued minor league baseball because their leaders believed in its potential for luring locals and visitors downtown. The three cities profiled are of differing sizes and have unique histories and socioeconomic roles that ensured that each one would approach the ballpark development differently, and can be used to at least partially explain the differences in results that are evident today.

Columbus, as a large Midwestern city that arguably enjoys a more pronounced national profile today than ever before, welcomed minor league baseball as a secondary, but complimentary, addition to what was already the city’s premier centerpiece development to promote downtown. While the arena and convention center undoubtedly dominate the arena district, the ballpark, with its extensive schedule and cheap tickets relative to events in those other venues, serves a different demographic that helps to fill a role in the Arena District, and further its transition from tourist attraction to real neighborhood.

Although only 70 miles from Columbus, Dayton is on a completely different trend; one that better corresponds with the circumstances other rust belt cities
today. Dayton is a city whose heights of national importance are behind her, and
now leaders and residents are in the middle of a long struggle to redefine their city's
role in America. Minor league baseball’s success in the city can be seen as a
manifestation of the values of its residents, namely loyalty, commitment and,
considering how bad the team has been for most of its history, staunch resiliency in
spite of lackluster results. The ballpark’s success begat further interest in downtown
because developers saw the character of the city’s people through that success.

Bowling Green is very different from the first two cities profiled; it is
Southern, not Midwestern; it has been a small town for most of its history, rather
than an historic regional capital; and its economic expansion over the last half-
century has at least partially been in the sectors that were lost by the rust belt cities.
As a result, Bowling Green is just beginning to take on its new role of significance on
a larger regional, state-wide and national scale. The ballpark, and the developments
that are intended to accompany it, are intended to reflect this new role;
transforming a small and historic downtown into an activity center on par with
older cities. City officials have gambled taxpayer money on the success of their
plans, and the result will likely have a major impact on the perceptions of residents,
many of who still hold onto their community as small-town idyll, relative to future
development.

None of these ballpark developments has been a perfect example of how to
use sports as a catalyst for downtown redevelopment; we have yet to see the
creation of a true neighborhood ballpark as proposed by Philip Bess. However, if the
downtowns that surround these ballparks are allowed to evolve, and are aided by
developers and local leaders, there is potential in each of them for the emergence of
a true community that transcends the implicit roles that these areas embody today;
that is, places of occasional entertainment, rather than places where any regular
living takes place.

Although it is mostly perception, places that face the challenge of losing their
identities, or building new identities, tend to fare better in the eyes of their residents
and outsiders alike when they are home to professional sports. Something as
seemingly insignificant as seeing a town name in the league standings in
newspapers across the country, or hearing it mentioned during major league
broadcasts when a newly-promoted player steps to the plate, means that place is
implicitly recognized as a place that, on some mostly intangible but very real level, is
important; a place that is good enough. It is this intangible importance; borne as a
result of our national collective obsession with sports, moreso than the exact
economic numbers, that makes minor league baseball valuable for cities.

Baseball remains the national pastime, and the continued growth of minor
league attendance through difficult economic times is evidence of its appeal to
Americans. In a way that is no longer possible in the majors, the experience of being
at the ballpark is integral to the present success of the minor leagues. Most fans of
major league clubs cheer on their teams through the television, because of
exorbitantly high ticket prices, and an artificially limited supply of teams. By
contrast, the minors are positively old-fashioned; with next to no television
coverage of live games, fans go to the ballpark and notice the little things; they smell the pine tar, eat their hot dogs and cracker-jacks, and hear the crack of the bat. There is a certain freedom in being at the ballpark that cannot be replicated through television; the patron can choose for himself what to pay attention to, and has to pay attention if he wants to follow the game, as there are no commentators to guide the viewer through. Whereas major league parks often relegate patrons to a specific seat, minor league parks allow them to wander around and encourage them to find their own perfect spot for watching the game. It is for all of these reasons that minor league baseball will continue to be something Americans care about, because, in a way, these teams made up of future stars, has-beens and never-will-bes, who still get on the team bus for road trips, and still make reasonable salaries, and still offer a family-friendly night of entertainment for a manageable price, somehow feel more American than their exaggerated big brothers in the majors. It is this authenticity that will keep me coming back every summer, win or lose.
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Figures


