

A Personal Account of a Sports Development Effort

My big call to play minor league baseball came in the fall of 1991 from Jim Goodmon, owner of the Durham Bulls. It had been 38 years since I batted .400 as a Little Leaguer, so I knew the call wasn't about my playing first base. Rather, Goodmon wanted me as a Raleigh City Council member to come by architect Benjamin Taylor's office and look at some plans for a new Triangle sports complex. For me, the visit began what became a crazy season in the frustrating new game of sports development. This is the story of that losing season.

Goodmon is president of Capitol Broadcasting Co., which owns WRAL-TV. He and his company are what local politicians like to call "good corporate citizens," but he is something more. He's a dreamer. And for years he has been dreaming of a sports park that would both feed on and foster Triangle regionalism.

His dream took shape after the successful and profitable 1987 Olympic Sports Festival — the national warm-up competition held in non-Olympic years. Cities across the country compete to host the games. The festival usually is a money-loser, but it brings a national sports and television audience to the host area. Goodmon's companies were heavily involved, and the festival brought together the three cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill in a remarkable public relations and financial success.

Not long afterwards, Goodmon proposed that Triangle leaders consider building a regional sports complex, including baseball, soccer, and tennis stadiums, and a 20,000 seat basketball arena. When I first ran for city council in 1989, I supported the proposal because I believed it was a prudent plan. It would benefit taxpayers in the long run to have one regional facility, and it would give the Triangle a world class sports complex.

By the time I visited Ben Taylor's office, however, Goodmon had reduced the scope of his

complex. The coliseum was gone, and the park contained only baseball and soccer stadiums but could be expanded for professional tennis and ice hockey. Goodmon also had become the proud owner of the now world-famous Durham Bulls minor league baseball team, which he hoped to use as an anchor attraction. In the next 12 months, this hope for regional sports development and cooperation would be turned on its head.

Durham city leaders, for starters, did not want to lose the Bulls from downtown, even though Durham voters recently had turned down a county-wide bond proposal to build a new stadium to accommodate the team's growing following. The Bulls already drew a regional audience and had become a fixture in downtown Durham. Goodmon offered to keep the sports complex in Durham County, but near the Wake County line in the heart of the Triangle. That proposal went nowhere.

The proposal became one part of an unprecedented county-wide agreement between Wake county and municipal officials. That agreement included plans to build a new Raleigh convention center, a children's museum, a performing arts theater, a portion of a new North Carolina State University coliseum, and reimbursements for a newly built baseball stadium for the AA Mudcats in Zebulon. It was an ambitious package and a political compromise. The agreement was a condition set by local legislators. They wisely wanted local city, town, and county officials to hammer out a settlement before they asked for enabling legislation that would raise local hotel-motel sales taxes and initiate a one percent sales tax on restaurant meals.

The argument to use such taxes for these projects was that the facilities would benefit travel and tourist business, and these businesses could thus bear the special tax burden. Politicians often respond to such arguments for special taxes. The current Wake County hotel-motel tax, for example, helps pay for the county's Visitors and Tourism Bureau.

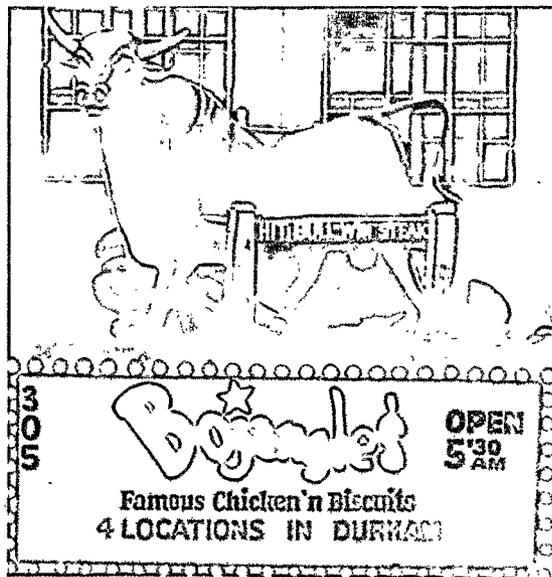
This agreement was much debated and discussed in intergovernmental meetings. It was reviewed especially by the Raleigh City Council and the Wake Board of Commissioners over several months. Lobbyists from both the hotel and restaurant groups contributed to the discussions. The enabling legislation was enacted with one hitch. Because of concerns by the Durham delegation about the future of the Bulls, an amendment was added that none of the monies raised by the local taxes would be used for a baseball stadium until 1995. That did not bother supporters of the sports park because the city had other revenues available that would allow the project to go forward. The amendment later would become the center of a critical misunderstanding.

The Wake County Board of Commissioners held public hearings on the taxes. These hearings were attended mostly by project supporters. A delegation of the Durham City Council did appear and oppose the building of the Triangle baseball stadium. The taxes, nevertheless, were approved toward the end of 1991. In Raleigh City Council meetings, the agreement was discussed in detail. I was committed to building the convention center, children's museum, and sports park, and I stated that one of the attractions of the latter two was that private money would help us get them built quickly so the public would have something to see for its money.

Unfortunately, the details of these debates were seldom reported in the media. This would prove fatal in the coming weeks. The public, as I came to learn, knew little of the details of the inter-local agreement or the debate over how the revenues were to be spent.

That changed dramatically when Raleigh, Wake County, and Cary officials took steps to build Triangle Sports Park, as the complex was named. Goodmon assembled the land, and a sports authority was formed. A financing package showed how the complex could be built without using revenues from the hotel and restaurant tax until 1995. The package also avoided a bond referendum.

The activity surprised the media and legislators, particularly Durham members of the N.C. House of Representatives. They had not heard the public debate and discussion about the details of the inter-local agreement, and most held the impression that the sports park would not be built until 1995. Meanwhile, after suffering 18 months



Karen Tam

Durham's smoke-blowing bull symbolizes the debate over the future of the franchise.

of hard times, the N.C. Restaurant Association had a change of heart on the prepared meals tax being spent on a sports complex. Durham city officials vowed a fight to the finish over moving the Bulls from downtown. The battle lines were joined.

The public became interested as the media began reporting more details about the sports park and the developing opposition. The ensuing debate contained some of the classic arguments for and against public participation in sports developments.

Those in favor of the complex argued that professional sports would bring new jobs and new dollars to the community, add to the intangible "quality of life" of Triangle residents, and make the area more attractive to new businesses. The

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fact that the public would own the facility also was cited as a positive by proponents.

Among the opposing arguments were that the public shouldn't build a stadium for a private, rich businessman, that the public should vote on the project in a bond referendum, that the city and county had more pressing needs than a sports complex, and that the timing was wrong for raising taxes.

Ironically, what began as a dream for regional cooperation and sports development evolved into a divisive inter-city, intergovernmental feud. Durham was fighting Raleigh,

state legislators were pointing fingers at local officials, and the public was split over whether to spend public funds.

When support among the Wake County legislative delegation collapsed, the deal was dead. Durham city officials offered to build a new stadium for Goodmon somewhere in the city, and that's where the project stands in September 1992.

I still believe a Triangle sports park is a prudent, progressive idea. I am convinced, however, that the public must be informed and educated on its role in worthwhile sports projects if such projects are to succeed in the future. That is the burden on public officials if they want to play ball.

—J. Barlow Herget

Association of Sports Commissions, says such an argument already has begun concerning the need for a new baseball or football stadium in that city. "Several articles have already been written to that effect," he notes.

An ICMA survey of cities that contained minor league baseball teams found that the biggest negative factors cited by city officials concerned public funds being spent on stadium costs. Disputes over stadium conditions and concerns over public subsidies to such teams were mentioned most often.¹⁷

The record shows the public often *does* become a partner in both professional and amateur sports ventures, although this varies some depending on the sport. Motor speedways, golf courses, and horse and dog tracks typically are privately held and operated, although betting at horse and

dog racing tracks is illegal in North Carolina. North Carolina's three major motor speedways are privately owned. The Charlotte speedway cost about \$2 million when first constructed in 1960. It would cost \$250 million to build today, says Bruton Smith, one of its owners.¹⁸

Even though these facilities have been built with private capital, they often ask the public to provide infrastructure expenses such as access roads and water and sewer. An example is Charlotte Motor Speedway, which will benefit from a \$10.6 million interchange to be constructed on the Cabarrus-Mecklenburg County line north of Charlotte. The speedway is to pick up nearly a third of the construction cost (32 percent), while another third will be paid by a group of developers who also will benefit. The remaining third will be paid by the taxpayers, according to Larry Goode, chief engineer for programs in the N.C. Department of Transportation.

In another perk, taxpayers pitch in \$100,000 annually for traffic control for major events at Charlotte Motor Speedway. Rep. Coy Privette (R-Cabarrus) questions this use of taxpayer funds for a private sporting event that grosses millions of dollars in revenue. "Charlotte Motor Speedway is the only one that gets it," says Privette. "We can't find resources for good causes but we can find resources to control traffic at a sporting event."¹⁹

Sports such as baseball, football, and basketball almost always require the public to share in the cost of building stadiums or coliseums. Of the

"Many residents believe that the city has pressing social, environmental, and educational needs that should be addressed before building a stadium."

FORREST JOHNSON, DURHAM CITIZEN
