

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Bringing Baseball Back!

A flurry of activity is generating excitement all over the valley because of talk of restoring professional baseball to greater Springfield. In just the past two weeks, meetings have taken place involving Red Sox management, New Britain Red Sox management, civic and business leaders and Governor Weld. I attended two of those meetings and have talked with the governor about our prospects. These are some of the reasons that we have a very good chance of acquiring a ball club in the very near future.

A confluence of circumstances feeds the optimism. First, the Boston Red Sox are seeking to build a farm club network throughout the market area of the parent team, and New Britain is outside of that area. Second, the New Britain Red Sox are at the end of a contract with that city, and the team owner is considering relocating. Third, Springfield is on record with its interest in acquiring a team, with a working committee in place to bring back baseball.

One big “plus” for Springfield in the contest for a baseball team is the fact that we are definitely part of Red Sox country. A marketing survey projects average attendance of 3,500 fans. Our regional population is 600,000, and no other major league team has a large claim to fan loyalty. Yankee fans may disagree, but statistically they are outnumbered! That fan loyalty fits well with Boston’s strategy to advance players through the farm system. A player who is the Double A shortstop in 1995, for example, might play the infield at Fenway by ‘97. Local interest will follow those players to Boston.

Another asset is that an excellent stadium site is available and ready for development. The Chicopee-Springfield Industrial Park, located near the junction of the Mass Turnpike and I-295, can house a 6,000-seat stadium that abuts the highway. That location provides added visibility for the team and easy access for fans. Parking will be available for 2,000 cars.

We also have an indication of state sources of financing to construct a stadium. By chance, Governor Weld had long-standing plans to be in Springfield last Thursday, the same day team owner Joe Buzas was in town. The governor met with Buzas and indicated that the state could fund at least half of the \$12 million cost of a new stadium. That participation makes the whole project more feasible.

Our team is not a sure thing, but when I asked Governor Weld what the team would be called, he referred to the Springfield-Chicopee Red Sox. Our stadium could not be ready until 1996, and the team needs a field next year. The financing will require much work, even with substantial state participation. And New Britain has offered to build a new stadium for the team.

The owner of the New Britain Red Sox is definitely shopping for new accommodations for his team, and Springfield is in the market. More than 500 fans traveled by bus to New Britain last weekend to show the kind of interest baseball will generate in the city. I hope the Joe Buzas was duly impressed. The 500 fans rode through the rain to see a game that was canceled. Nonetheless, everybody had a wonderful time. If that is not commitment, I don’t know what is.