

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Bringing Baseball Back (Again)

We are bringing professional baseball back to Springfield! And this time we mean it. The Harrisburg Senators will move to Springfield in 1997 to play in a new stadium that will be built next to I-291 near the Mass Turnpike.

Last summer brought a bubble of excitement to local baseball fans at the prospect of acquiring the New Britain team for Western Massachusetts, a bubble that burst when the team's owner changed his mind. As someone who grew up watching minor league baseball, I was disappointed at that decision, so I am happy to report the recent turn of events. This is what has happened to make baseball a reality for us.

Many fans, community leaders and civic officials were disappointed when we were unable to win the New Britain team after last summer's negotiations. A new stadium site had been selected on the Springfield-Chicopee city line. Financing had been arranged among private, city and state sources. The Red Sox organization was eager to gain the regional venue to showcase developing players, and public support was enthusiastic. A marketing study demonstrated the potential for a successful venture. All of those factors were not enough to gain the team last summer, but each one was important when another opportunity was presented this spring.

I received a call in March inviting me to a briefing about the negotiations between Springfield's Bring Baseball Back Committee and the Harrisburg Senators, a minor league AA team. The team is affiliated with the Houston Astros, and it is the same franchise that formerly played in Holyoke as the Millers. The team was interested in moving, and the welcome extended to New Britain by Springfield made our city a logical and attractive site for relocating. The groundwork that went into that planning process last summer could be brushed off and applied to the new situation.

Negotiations were quickly undertaken, and they progressed rapidly, although they were out of the public eye. Business details were ironed out, and state and municipal financing were renegotiated.

Then came the last piece of the package, the vote of approval by other team owners in the league. The vote, which was expected to be a mere formality, suddenly turned into a possible deal-breaker. At the last minute, one owner was hesitant to deprive Harrisburg of its team, causing a week's delay while the league worked out a compromise. After that week of nervous waiting, the owners agreed on a moratorium on moves, a moratorium that will go into effect after Harrisburg moves to Springfield. They also agreed to assist the Pennsylvania city in gaining another team.

Now, thanks to the tenacity of the individuals who have persevered when others might have given up, we have a great season to look forward to. The team's parent club is still to be announced. The stadium is still to be built. But we know that the year will be 1997. And the hometown will be Springfield.