

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

December 12, 1996

Can Springfield bring baseball back?

Springfield's quest for a professional baseball team has been a two-year roller coaster ride for its supporters. We have had highs and lows over the years as the city works to get on board with the national resurgence of minor league baseball. Last week's events have put the project once again on the hard uphill climb.

I first learned of the possibility of a Springfield team in 1994. The many pieces required for a Springfield franchise all seemed to be in place. We had an interested team owner from New Britain, a stadium site with development funds coming from a combination of private, city and state sources, and a marketing study that forecast a successful venture. Then the project collapsed when the team owner decided to keep his franchise in Connecticut.

The next year, 1995, the city's baseball promoters again had good news. A Harrisburg team would move to Springfield. But before any further planning took place, the city of Harrisburg bought the franchise in order to keep it in Pennsylvania. That brings us to the present.

As 1996 draws to a close, the city of Springfield finally has a firm offer of a baseball franchise, an offer from professional baseball itself. But, as the prospect for a team grows stronger, the prospect of a stadium grows distinctly weaker. The problem is that all parties are looking for somebody else to pay for construction. Prospective owners are looking to government. The city is looking to the state; the state is saying (through House Speaker Tom Finneran) that Massachusetts cannot and should not underwrite a commercial enterprise.

The preceding paragraphs set the scene we see today. One reason for the Speaker's hard line on state funding is the stadium plans for the Patriots and the Red Sox. Both teams are seeking hundreds of millions of dollars in state funding for new facilities, and \$10 or \$15 million to support Springfield construction would set a precedent that would snowball in Boston. Governor Weld supports the expenditures of public money for such uses, but authorizing legislation must come from the legislature.

Another factor that weighs against state funding is the fragile status of the economic recovery in Massachusetts. Public money has many competing needs and, although other states are funding such enterprises with targeted taxes on concessions and hotels, Massachusetts has rejected new taxes for any purpose.

In talking with area residents over the past week, I have met opinions ranging from strong support to equally strong disapproval. From my perspective, I would love to have the team in Western Massachusetts. I will work with city officials and legislative colleagues to develop a funding package that might draw on various sources of capital. Perhaps the state can help with infrastructure costs. Maybe the city can use some of the bonding commitment that will be freed up after the legislature assumes the \$25 million bonding for the Basketball Hall of Fame. Private money can be sought to underwrite some of the costs. The legislative art of compromise will be put to the ultimate test.

Springfield now has its third opportunity for a baseball team, and a third strike analogy seems applicable. We missed the first two opportunities, through no fault of Springfield. Now it is up to us to hit the ball or head back to the dugout.