

Foul Ball

State shouldn't pay for a baseball stadium in Portland.



This week a group of executives representing Major League Baseball will visit Portland to determine whether the Rose City would be a good site for a major league team. Let's hope that the MLB executives focus on the scenery and overlook the fact that 25 percent of Oregon's professional athletes faced criminal charges in 2003. (We don't call 'em the Jail Blazers for nothing.)

While I would welcome a new baseball team in Oregon, I'm less thrilled about the suggestion that the Legislature should pay to build a baseball stadium in Portland. Anyone who thinks we should spend our scarce tax revenue on a new stadium must have his cap on too tight.

What's wrong with state-funded baseball in Oregon?

STRIKE ONE: We need the money for more important purposes, especially education. Oregon currently has the shortest school year of any state in the nation. It would be unconscionable to divert more money from the education budget in order to build luxury boxes for rich lawyers and doctors in Portland. What an irony: With further cuts to education funding, the school year would end just as the new ballpark would open each year. I guess some of the school kids could sit in the cheap seats. It's like mandatory hooky.

STRIKE TWO: Let's be honest about the entertainment value of baseball. From a spectator's standpoint, the sport ranks somewhere between pro bowling and shuffleboard on the boredom scale. Rosanne Barr put it best: "I like tobacco-spitting and crotch-scratching as much as the next person, but I get tired of watching it after three and a half hours." Even if you enjoy baseball, there's no guarantee that the new Portland team would be any good. They could be as bad as the Montreal Expos in the 1990s. Oh wait, they *are* the Montreal Expos. Remember why the Expos are for sale. Their games were so unbearable that the Montreal fans stopped showing up at the ballpark.

STRIKE THREE: I'll concede that a publicly funded construction project would create new jobs, but I think the Legislature should distribute such projects throughout the state instead of concentrating all the funding in Portland. After all, Portland is Oregon's most prosperous city. As a county commissioner, I sit on the Lane County Economic Development Committee, and I've learned that the state may slash its funding for economic development in our county, even though some of our local communities such as Oakridge have higher unemployment rates than Portland. I've heard Portland officials talk about a "trickle-down relationship" between Portland and Lane County, but it seems more like the trickle-down relationship between a dog and a fire hydrant.

While I don't support state funding for baseball, I recognize that the Legislature may need to play a role in facilitating private investment in a new stadium. Recently the House passed HB 3606 which would authorize an outside entity to issue bonds for the construction of a new stadium, but not put the state on the hook as the guarantor for the bonds. Many of our Lane County legislators supported this approach, and I understand why they did. We need to pursue any opportunity to put Oregonians back to work, as long as we're not promising direct subsidies from the state. The staunchest baseball fans were disappointed by HB 3606, but I'm glad that our local legislators are sticking up for Oregon's workers without placing undue burdens on the budget. The bill now awaits a vote in the Senate.

Portland officials have made a strong pitch for a new stadium, but if they want state money, their pitch is high and inside. It could be a bean ball for education and social services in Oregon.

Tom Lininger is county commissioner for the East Lane District.

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