



San Diego Union-Tribune, The (CA)

Keep the Padres and build a ballpark- Art Madrid and George Mitrovich **Art Madrid and George Mitrovich MADRID is mayor of La Mesa. MITROVICH is president of The City Club of San Diego.**

Published: October 17, 1997

Recently, we announced formation of The Committee of 2000, an independent organization of citizens committed to keeping the Padres in San Diego and providing support to build a baseball-oriented ballpark.

The committee and its 119 co-chairs, ranging from elementary school students to Father Joe Carroll, from the Rev. Mark Trotter to Rabbi Jonathan Stein, from Police Officers Association President Garry Collins to arts patron Danah Fayman, warned that without a baseball-oriented ballpark, the Padres, whose lease at Qualcomm Stadium expires in 1999, would leave San Diego.

The team will leave, not because the Padres' management threatens to leave -- they don't operate that way -- but because the economics of major league baseball will leave them with no alternative.

Those who say the Padres can make it financially at Qualcomm Stadium, as this newspaper's financial editor has consistently claimed, ignore a clear and unmistakable message: The Padres will not stay at Qualcomm, a fact underscored recently by John Moores, the team's principal owner.

Multi-use stadiums like Qualcomm no longer work for baseball teams. Throughout major league baseball, new ballparks have arisen, and each new ballpark has seen a dramatic rise in attendance -- as witnessed by the stunning success in Baltimore, Cleveland and Denver.

But the new stadium phenomenon isn't simply confined to major league cities. In the past 12 years, 78 new ballparks have been built for minor league teams, from Triple-A to short season. During this period, the minors have experienced a dramatic attendance rise from 18,949,972 in 1985 to 34,691,716 in 1997, an increase of 83 percent.

This astonishing turnaround has seen cities such as Shreveport, La., experience a 260 percent attendance increase; Appleton, Wis., 251 percent; Buffalo, N.Y., 167 percent; and Charlotte, N.C., 141 percent. Buffalo, with a Triple-A team and with a 20,000-seat downtown ballpark, drew 1 million or more fans six years in succession.

This year, with a new downtown ballpark, Akron, Ohio, in the Class-A Eastern League, only 50 miles from Cleveland, drew more than a half-million fans, despite a dismal record of 50 wins and 90 losses. Akron's success has been equaled or surpassed in places like New Orleans, Norfolk, Va., Lansing, Mich., Frederick, Md., San Antonio, Texas, and Portland, Maine.

Since these remarkable attendance figures often appear divorced from won-loss records, they can only be understood in the light of what some observers of both society and sports call, "the mystical relationship between baseball, ballparks and people."

Some of the great writers of our age, from John Updike to W.P. Kinsella to Roger Kahn, have sought to convey this mystical quality about ballparks and people, but have failed. But any fan who has ever spent a summer day at Fenway Park in Boston or Wrigley Field in Chicago, or the new ballparks in Baltimore, Cleveland and Denver, knows what it is -- and it is palpable.

In a poll this summer, The Boston Globe asked its readers, "Why do you go to Red Sox games? Is it the team? Is it Fenway Park? Thirty-nine percent said they went because of the Red Sox; 51 percent said, Fenway.

As we point out above, in city after city where new ballparks have been built -- a total of 90 new major and minor league ballparks since 1985 -- there has been a rise in related economic development and benefits, a fact especially true of ballparks built in downtown areas.

Evidence for this abounds in Baltimore, Cleveland and Denver. It is visual and it is dramatic. No one having seen any one of these three downtown areas prior to the building of Camden Yards, Jacobs Field and Coors, will dispute the fact that an extraordinary change has taken place.

All three cities have experienced a building boom, and property values have skyrocketed. In Denver alone, lofts adjacent to Coors Field originally pegged to sell for \$250,000 per unit have sold for as high as \$750,000. This is something our region should bear in mind when site selections are considered.

These examples, of both major and minor league teams, underscore what San Diego area baseball fans should understand about successes enjoyed elsewhere and the relationship of that to the competition the Padres face.

That competition includes 12 major league teams playing in, or about to play in, new ballparks -- Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago (White Sox), Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Milwaukee, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle, Texas and Tampa. In addition, six others seek new ballparks -- Boston, Cincinnati, Minnesota, New York (Yankees), Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The Angels, under the Disney Corp., are remodeling their ballpark for baseball only.

A new baseball-oriented ballpark for the Padres, with a seating capacity of 42,000, could, over an 81-game home season, mean as much as \$25 million in added revenue for the team. This is a critical factor if the Padres are to stay here, because they have no other way to grow. Advertising revenue is limited by the fact that San Diego is only the 27th largest media market in the nation -- and given that we have an ocean to the west, Mexico to the south, Los Angeles to the north and mountains to the east, our market size is not likely to change. With such formidable competition, we believe the proposal for a baseball-oriented ballpark is so important to the Padres' future.

This proposal, however, must not be burdened with the controversy over the Chargers' contract. To do so would be manifestly unfair. We cannot afford to lose the Padres because people are still angry and upset over the Chargers' deal.

In a democratic society, reasonable men and women will differ about what is best for a community. Our obligation, those who comprise the Committee of 2000, is to insulate that in the debate already joined, to keep our perspective and our civility while making a strong case for the Padres and a new baseball-oriented ballpark.

But while we debate those merits, bear this in mind:

How ironic if on the day that Tony Gwynn, the greatest of all Padres, is inducted into The Baseball Hall of Fame, the Padres were no longer San Diego's team, but playing in Northern Virginia. If you believe that is simply a hypothetical question, then you mislead yourself.

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