

The Unsung Funders

Travelers are often the true financiers behind new sports facilities

I've had the conversation before. Sometimes it will start while I'm in a city and I ask for directions to a sports stadium, to which I will then drive my rental car that helped pay for that stadium. Sometimes it will happen when I take a taxi to a sports arena and engage the driver in a conversation about how the new arena is being received by locals. Or sometimes it will arise in discussions with public officials on various sides of the issue of public financing of sports arenas. (I say "arenas" to avoid having to decide on a plural for "stadium"—the stilted but more faithfully Latin "stadia" or the more popular but relative newcomer "stadiums.")

This time, however, the conversation originated in an unusual setting. I was harnessing up a team of dogs in Whistler, British Columbia, to go dog sledding when one of the guides announced that part of our trek would be on the course that would be used for cross-country skiing in the 2010 Olympics. "Oh, I don't want to hear that," said one of the other tourists about to go on the trek. "I'm anti-Olympics. They should take that money and spend it on the homeless." So much for getting away into the wilderness and avoiding political discussion.

My fellow dog sledder would probably have bonded with the local in Pittsburgh who, when I asked for directions to PNC Park, told me that the money spent for the stadium should have been spent to fix potholes, or the self-described "libertarian anarchist" taxi driver in Houston who told me that sports stadiums are monuments to a misguided culture (look for a lively debate on this issue at the 2008 Libertarian Anarchist convention). Nevertheless, I am able to enjoy my sporting experiences with a relatively clear conscience. Part of the reason is that I, as the traveler (like most readers of this magazine), often am the one that is paying for a healthy chunk of the stadium.

by Bob Latham

It is the tax dollars that I pay on top of rental car charges, hotel bills and the like that often finance sports arenas, not funds that would otherwise be earmarked to combat the homeless problem or pave roads. And, to support my belief that building a sports arena and paving roads are not mutually exclusive, I have generally found the roads around new arenas to be well-paved. It also occurs to me that the money that is being, shall we say, "re-allocated" from

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us sports travelers and put into the local economy has the potential to positively affect the condition of the homeless (how much the homeless problem is related to economic conditions as opposed to other factors is beyond the scope of this column or this columnist).

Sure, locals may also contribute, through a sales tax increase for instance, but presumably they and the city they live in will recoup that investment. After all, almost 2,000 years later, Rome is still seeing dividends off the Colosseum. The contemporary landmarks of today can become the historical landmarks of tomorrow.

One recent study found that 35 percent of professional sporting venues built since 1990 have been funded in part by tourism taxes. One prime example is Houston, where the three new sports facilities—Toyota Center, Minute Maid Park and Reliant Stadium—together cost an estimated \$1 billion (to the everlasting chagrin of the libertarian anarchist), most of which came from hotel-motel and rental-car taxes.

There was a Monty Python skit in which, during a political debate, one

character said: "To boost the British economy, I'd tax all foreigners living abroad." I don't know who was the first to apply this model to the construction of American sports facilities—to tax the tourists so the locals could enjoy—but whenever I hear of somebody objecting to their local tax dollars going to finance a sports stadium, I remind them that their fellow local citizens are probably already paying for the sports stadia (all right, I went with the stilted plural) in Cleveland, Chicago, Seattle and many other places they travel.

The practice of taxing tourists is not without its critics. The National Business Travel Association says it is a form of "taxation without representation" and a way to bring in added revenue without public officials being accountable to the people who pay it. And others point out that the tourism and event trade may suffer if these taxes reach the tipping point.

So then, what is an overtaxed tourist to do? Here's my solution: Go see what you paid for. Sure, you may be further contributing to the wealth of a billionaire owner. But when you buy the latest version of Windows, do you worry that Bill Gates may get richer? No, you want to enjoy a better operating system for your computer. Sports arenas do have the potential to make cities—and your enjoyment of a city—better. So if that hotel room is costing you nine more dollars than it might have otherwise, it may be because there is a stadium nearby where you would enjoy food that would represent local tastes, where fans will give you a sense of local culture, and where you will see a star in his or her natural habitat. If you were in Rome, you wouldn't hesitate to go to the Colosseum. So, as long as you're helping to pay the tab anyway, when in Detroit why hesitate to go to Comerica Park? ■

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