

NEW STADIUMS VS. PAST INDUSTRY:

THE CHANGING IMAGE OF PITTSBURGH

Pittsburgh is forging a bright future. The plan, known publicly as “Plan B,” is to build two new stadiums (one for the Pirates and one for the Steelers) and to expand the Convention Center; construction is underway. The new stadiums, especially the Steelers’ stadium, will foster new economic growth. Pittsburgh’s reputation and image have long been set by its history as a coal and steel industrial city. A new image of Pittsburgh must be realized. This new stadium means a new bright future for Pittsburgh and its residents.

“Pittsburgh’s history is a recital of American history. From early Native American settlements to the arrival of the Europeans, Pittsburgh has embodied America’s great push towards progress. Along Pittsburgh’s rivers an industrial empire was born, and within the swirl of its three rivers, Pittsburgh is a seamless blend of past and present, products and people, all chronicled in a single skyline.”

This quote from the Facts & Stats page of the Greater Pittsburgh Convention & Visitors Bureau web site says it all, as far as much of Pittsburgh’s population is concerned.

Named after British leader William Pitt in late November 1758, Pittsburgh became incorporated as a city in 1816. Within half a century, the potential for Pittsburgh to be an industrial giant was realized. The industrial dream became reality, often a harsh reality for the workers, with tycoons like Andrew Carnegie leading the way. The city was turned into a booming industrial site with coal mines and steel mills. It is these steel mills and smokestacks that are most associated with Pittsburgh. It is also how the Steelers got their name.

Pittsburgh’s football team was founded in 1933, but was named the Pirates. In 1940, the name was changed to Steelers to reflect the history and heritage of Pittsburgh. As one of the most successful teams in the NFL, the Steelers have made it to the Superbowl on numerous occasions and have won many AFC crowns. The Steelers currently play in Three Rivers Stadium, but not for very long.

Three Rivers Stadium is aptly named. Situated at the meeting of the Ohio River, the Monongahela River, and the Allegheny River, the stadium opened July 16, 1970. The first World Series night game was played there October 13, 1971. Both the Steelers and the Pirates have had many victories at Three Rivers Stadium, including the Steelers’ second and fourth AFC crowns, won there in 1976 and 1980, and the Pirates’ third consecutive division crown, won in 1991.

However, the stadium is outdated and the public wants more—more seating, more restrooms, and a state-of-the-art scoreboard and sound system. All of this will be provided by the new Steelers’ stadium¹, made possible by Plan B, the “Season Ticket to Economic Development.”

The nickname of “Plan B” of course implies there was an earlier plan. The “Plan A” [never officially known as such] required the contributions of new taxes from 11 counties. It was voted down quickly. Plan B’s projected cost is \$809 million. It has passed through the referendums and construction has already begun downtown on the new stadium.

The critics of Plan B voice mainly two concerns. One, they wonder at Mayor Tom Murphy's true motives in proposing Plan B. Two, they worry about the money required for and complexity of this project.

Some people feel there may have been ulterior motives in the proposal of Plan B. Mayor Tom Murphy, a large player in the proposing and passing of Plan B, may have worked hard on this plan simply to please the people and stay Mayor. One of his predecessors, Mayor Sophie Masloff, proposed an old-fashioned baseball park back in 1991, and her plan was met with a resounding no. Murphy could have taken a cue from this; the people of Pittsburgh want a more modern city image and more state-of-the-art sports facilities.

When Murphy was sworn into office, the Pirates were in the midst of suing the city, claiming their lease deal in Three Rivers Stadium was horrendous and that the city failed to maintain the stadium as a "first-class facility." Murphy had little choice but to promise them a new stadium. One conclusion drawn is that Plan B might have been conceived under duress and pressure from one of the teams that would benefit most from it. However, the motives in mind of the Mayor matter little in the long run—for this plan, it is the results that count.

While the experts and critics can find no snags currently in Plan B, many are worried about "potential snags." For example, the plan seems complicated. With three renovation projects, tightly linked to one another, and funding coming from a variety of sources, there is a chance something could go wrong. Also, many critics worry about the pledges of the team owners: both the Steelers and the Pirates have said they will pay for a large part of the stadium funding. The main concern of the critics is the possibility of Plan B going over budget with no one willing to pay. The team owners promised to cover over-budget expenses, but the figures they project are too low, some experts say.

However, a complex plan is not a plan destined for failure. Pittsburgh is long overdue for change, and change is never easy and simple. It is only pessimism and skepticism that can find fault in the team owners' offers, that cites the owners' eagerness to pay as a sign that the funding will run out.

The Pirates said they would pay \$40 million and they have paid what they promised. In mid-June 1998, the owners of the Steelers took a stand against Plan B, refusing to pay more than \$50 million, and threatening to move to the suburbs. Since then, they have re-evaluated their position. They're now putting up \$76.5 million. There is no evidence that they will stop funding or back out of the deal.

"Together, the owners of the Steelers and Pirates have given the largest private contribution in Plan B and one of the most outstanding contributions in sports history."²

To get a better framework on the issues of expense and reward, it is helpful to see the precedent set by other cities:

"Plan B is one of the most conservative plans in the nation for public funding of stadiums. In Connecticut, the state is spending \$375 million to bring one major league team to their state. Pennsylvania has the rare opportunity to preserve four teams for significantly less.

In many other cities, such as Cleveland and Chicago, plans for new stadium financing have included tax increases or new taxes. Plan B will revitalize Southwestern Pennsylvania without raising taxes or providing any new taxes.”³

Pittsburgh has undergone two previous urban renewal periods known as Renaissance I (in the 1950’s—the first such plan in the nation) and Renaissance II (in the 1980’s). Both Renaissance I and Renaissance II were successful. The first transformed the Point from a heavy industrial zone to Point State Park and created Mellon Square and a parkway connecting to the new Pennsylvania Turnpike. The second Renaissance restored and rebuilt downtown and created the subway system. Plan B can be seen as a third Renaissance, and it promises to be as successful as the first two.

¹ Paraphrased from Pittsburgh City Paper Online.
Volume 9 - Issue 39 • September 29 thru October 6, 1999.
<http://www.pghcitypaper.com/cphome.htm>

^{2,3} Quoted from http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/planb/html/plan_b_q_and_a.html

⁴ *Rand McNally Places Rated Almanac*