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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

OLYMPIC BIDS, PROFESSIONAL SPORTS, AND URBAN POLITICS:  
FOUR DECADES OF STADIUM PLANNING IN DETROIT, 1936-1975

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

JEFFREY R. WING

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2016

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## ABSTRACT

Between 1936 and 1975, political and business leaders in Detroit tried to gain support for the financing and construction of a municipal stadium. The stadium plan originated as part of an attempt to bring the Summer Olympics to the city. The municipal stadium was to serve as the main Olympic stadium and be used for a variety of events after the Olympics were finished. Later, after Detroit leaders gave up on the Olympics after several failed bids, the stadium plan evolved into a domed facility on the downtown riverfront for the Detroit Tigers and Detroit Lions, the city's professional baseball and football teams. This dissertation examines the attempts of political and business leaders in Detroit to build a municipal sports stadium over the course of four decades in order to illuminate key themes in Detroit history. A thorough examination of the city's efforts to build a multi-purpose stadium contributes to a more nuanced depiction of the city's growth and decline throughout the twentieth century. Detroit became an important industrial center with the rise of the American automobile industry during the first half of the century and became a symbol of urban decay, racial warfare, and poverty by the 1980s. Exploring the municipal stadium story within this process of growth and decline will illuminate the history of urban politics, planning, race, and economics in Detroit.

Several sport historians have analyzed the growth of professional sports as part of American urbanization and modernization, but few scholarly treatments have assessed the specific political and economic factors which led to the planning and construction of professional sports facilities and the cultural significance which city residents attached to



those facilities. Most studies of urban sport history focus on major cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago, but they have neglected many cities of the industrial Midwest, including Detroit. An examination of the history of Detroit's failed attempt to build a municipal stadium contributes to a clearer understanding about the role of urban politics, economics, and culture in the Rust Belt, particularly in terms of Detroit's political economy during this period and the growing political and economic power of suburbs during the mid-twentieth century.

## INTRODUCTION

In August 1975, the Detroit Lions of the National Football League began play in the brand-new Pontiac Metropolitan Stadium (later known as the Pontiac Silverdome), after four decades in Detroit. The new facility was the largest domed stadium in the world upon opening, with a capacity of more than 80,000. Although the Lions were perennial also-rans in their division for more than a decade, more than fifty thousand Detroit area residents bought their season tickets before a single game was played. The new facility promised to be an economic boon for the city of Pontiac and the Detroit metropolitan area, pumping an estimated \$33 million into the local economy and creating around 2,000 jobs on football game days.<sup>1</sup>

The Pontiac stadium issue was resolved after a lengthy battle between Detroit city and business leaders and Lions owner William Clay Ford over the location of a new stadium in the Detroit metropolitan area. But the full story stretches back much farther. Detroit civic leaders had tried to gain support, acquire funds, and develop plans for a municipal stadium since the mid-1930s. In 1936, the establishment of the Detroit Olympic Committee represented the first organized effort to construct a publicly funded, multi-purpose sport facility in the Motor City. After successive failures to secure an Olympic bid for the city throughout the 1940s and 1950s, stadium supporters proposed that the facility be constructed as a home for the city's professional sports teams instead,

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<sup>1</sup> "Pontiac, Mich. Stadium 'a symbol,'" *Chicago Daily Herald*, 18 June 1975.

rather than solely for the purpose of hosting a Summer Olympiad. William Clay Ford and Detroit Tigers owner John Fetzer were intrigued by the thought of a modern stadium in Detroit, as long as the facility met their specific demands and requirements.

In early 1969, Detroit leaders began planning for a multi-purpose, downtown, domed stadium along Detroit's riverfront to house both the Lions and baseball's Detroit Tigers. Ford grew frustrated with the city's slow rate of progress on the stadium issue, and he continually expressed his reluctance over a downtown stadium throughout the discussions. In 1971, he announced that the Lions had signed an agreement with the city of Pontiac to play in a new football-only stadium to be constructed for the 1975 football season. After the loss of the Lions, Detroit leaders agreed to continue pursuing a downtown stadium as a home for the Tigers and a world-class venue for several other events.

One year after Ford made his decision to leave Detroit, and just as Detroit's stadium planners seemed to be moving forward with the plan, a group of concerned citizens brought a lawsuit against Wayne County and the Wayne County Stadium Authority (WCSA). The plaintiffs in the case, led by Mayor Royce Smith of Belleville, a western suburb of Detroit, claimed that "the proposed stadium is presently designed for the benefit of a private corporation; namely, the Detroit Baseball Club or the Detroit Tigers," which violated the Michigan Constitution of 1963.<sup>2</sup> They continued, "The county of Wayne is in need of all its funds for public purposes, not the least of which

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<sup>2</sup> Complaint: Marc Alan, William Roskelly and Royce Smith, taxpayers on behalf of a class, consisting of taxpayers in Wayne County, and City of Belleville, a municipal corporation v. County of Wayne, a body politic and a subdivision of the State of Michigan, and Wayne County Stadium Authority, a municipal corporation," Box 11 Folder 2, Detroit Economic Development Corporation (DEDC) Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

include construction of new jail facilities, which has already been ordered by the Wayne County Circuit Court, educational and health facilities, and manpower and facilities to prevent crime within the County of Wayne.”<sup>3</sup> The Michigan Supreme Court agreed with the plaintiffs that the agreement between the Detroit Tigers and the WCSA used public funds for the benefit of a private business, and the court’s decision ruined any chance for a downtown domed stadium. Ford’s decision to move the Lions to Pontiac and the lawsuit against the WCSA dealt two successive, embarrassing blows to the city of Detroit. The city’s failure to build a municipal stadium between the 1930s and the 1970s and the stadium struggle between Pontiac and Detroit in the 1970s resulted from competing political and economic interests in the Detroit metropolitan area and Detroit’s gradual loss of economic and cultural dominance in the region after World War II. It also symbolizes the Detroit metropolitan area’s legacy of political, racial, and economic division throughout the twentieth century.

This dissertation examines the Detroit Olympic Committee’s plans to build a municipal stadium as part of an overall plan to bring the Summer Olympics to Detroit, and the evolution of that stadium plan into a multi-purpose, publicly-financed facility for Major League Baseball’s Detroit Tigers and the National Football League’s Detroit Lions. This story, along with the eventual defeat of the stadium plan in court, illuminates several key themes in Detroit history. A thorough examination of the city’s failure to build a municipal stadium from the late 1930s to the early 1970s in Detroit contributes to a more nuanced depiction of the city’s growth and decline throughout the twentieth century. Detroit became an important industrial center with the rise of the American

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

automobile industry during the first half of the century and became a symbol of urban decay, racial warfare, and poverty by the 1980s. Exploring the attempts of civic leaders to build a massive, public sports complex within this process of growth and decline adds to our understanding of the history of urban politics, planning, race, and economics in Detroit.

Sport historians have analyzed the growth of professional sports as part of American urbanization and modernization, but few historians have assessed the specific political and economic factors which led to the planning and construction of professional sport facilities and the cultural significance which city residents attached to those facilities. Most studies of urban sport history focus on major cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, and Chicago, but they have neglected many cities of the industrial Midwest, including Detroit.<sup>4</sup> An examination of the history of professional sport stadiums in Detroit contributes to a clearer understanding of the role of urban politics, economics, and culture in the Rust Belt, particularly in terms of Detroit's political economy during this period and the role of sports and spectators as part of the new urban culture.

As Detroit grew in size and stature during the early twentieth century, it became closely linked with the nation's racial problems. Detroit attracted people of various races and ethnicities in search of employment. Southern blacks moved to Detroit during and

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<sup>4</sup> See Melvin Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1986; Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Stephen Hardy, *How Boston Played: Sport, Recreation, and Community, 1865-1915* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1982); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Steven A. Riess and Gerald R. Gems, ed., *The Chicago Sports Reader: 100 Years of Sports in the Windy City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Elliott J. Gorn, ed., *Sports in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

after World War I seeking better employment opportunities and living conditions in the urban North than they had in the oppressive South.<sup>5</sup> As Detroit's population became more racially and ethnically diverse, its sport stadiums symbolized the racial lines which divided the city. The Tigers played in baseball's American League, which banned black players from its inception in 1901, making many black Detroiters feel unwelcome at Navin Field, home of the Tigers, during the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> These citizens found a more inclusive sporting culture in 1920, when the Detroit Stars joined the newly-formed Negro National League. In their early years, the Stars played their home games at Mack Park on the city's east side and, although the park was not in the city's black enclave, the Stars attracted thousands of black spectators per game. Navin Field and Mack Park represented the segregated landscape which existed in the urban North during the early part of the century.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1920s, Detroit's professional sports landscape grew with the establishment of the Detroit Red Wings hockey club. Professional sports were growing in popularity

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<sup>5</sup> See Richard Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). On the establishment of black communities in other northern cities during the first half of the twentieth century, see James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Lillian Serece Williams, *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York, 1900-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> G. Edward White, *Creating the National Pastime: Baseball Transforms Itself, 1903-1953* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 127-8.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Bak, *Turkey Stearns and the Detroit Stars: The Negro Leagues in Detroit, 1919-1933* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994). On the history of the Negro Leagues and their place within American society and culture, see Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Leslie A. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2003); Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

and cultural importance in Detroit, as they were in other American cities, and Detroiters welcomed new forms of sporting entertainment, particularly during late fall and winter when the Tigers' season was over.<sup>8</sup> The Red Wings played at Olympia Stadium, built in 1927, three miles northwest of downtown. The structure featured majestic arches, a spacious interior, and attracted favorable national attention. A *New York Times* writer claimed that "in appearance, the Olympia reminds one of [Madison Square] Garden; the only real differences are capacity and interior construction."<sup>9</sup> The Olympia was popular among many white Detroiters, but black Detroiters showed little interest in hockey, and Red Wings management showed little interest in reaching out to the African-American community.

In 1934, a few years after the Red Wings arrived in Detroit, the Portsmouth Spartans of the National Football League moved to the city and were renamed the Detroit Lions.<sup>10</sup> They played their first four seasons at the University of Detroit Stadium before moving to Briggs Stadium (later named Tiger Stadium) in 1938. During the Lions' early years, the National Football League had not yet become a major commercial and culture enterprise on the level of baseball's major leagues. The Lions did not have the necessary capital to pay for their own stadium, nor did they have the cultural capital to request public funds for construction. Therefore, they played their home games in a park

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<sup>8</sup> For a thorough historical analysis of the early years of the National Hockey League, see John Chi-Kit Wong, *Lords of the Rink: The Emergence of the National Hockey League, 1875-1936*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> James P. Dawson, "Heeney Outpoints Risko at Detroit," *New York Times*, 27 October 1927.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Coenen, *From Sandlots to the Super Bowl: The National Football League, 1920-1967* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 83.

designed specifically for baseball. Nevertheless, the team gradually became an important element in the city's sporting culture.<sup>11</sup>

As the culture of professional sports in Detroit grew steadily throughout the first half of the twentieth century, some civic leaders in the Motor City witnessed the simultaneous growth in popularity of the Olympic Games. The modern Olympics began in 1896 in Athens, and they were a major international event by the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Local industrialist and sports enthusiast Frederick Matthaei organized the Detroit Olympic Committee (DOC) in 1936 in order to develop a bid to present to the American Olympic Association (AOA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on behalf of the city. Detroit presented official bids to the AOA (later named the American Olympic Committee and the United States Olympic Committee) and the IOC for every Summer Olympiad between 1940 and 1972 but was denied each time.

Some members of the DOC blamed the lack of a suitable Olympic stadium for the city's failure to host the Summer Games. This was certainly a contributing factor, but there were other reasons for the city's three decades of Olympic disappointment. The DOC, the Detroit Common Council, and successive mayoral administrations could not agree on where to build an Olympic stadium, how much public money should be invested

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<sup>11</sup> On the rise of the National Football League in American culture, see Phil Patton, *Razzle Dazzle: The Curious Marriage of Television and Professional Football* (Garden City, NY: Dial Press, 1984); Robert Peterson, *Pigskin: The Early Years of Pro Football* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Keith McClellan, *The Sunday Game: At the Dawn of Professional Football* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 1998); Kathryn Jay, *More Than Just a Game: Sports in American Life Since 1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2004); Coenen, *From Sandlots to the Super Bowl*.

<sup>12</sup> See Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold (eds.), *Olympic Cities: City Agendas, Planning, and the World's Games, 1896-2012* (New York: Routledge, 2007).



in such a project, or the type of stadium that should be constructed. Other factors, however, were out of the control of local Olympic organizers. Many IOC members responsible for choosing the host cities claimed that Pierre de Coubertin, considered the father of the modern Olympics, intended for two out of every three Olympic Games to be hosted by a European city.<sup>13</sup> This limited the opportunities for an American city to host the Olympics, and the fact that 1932 Games took place in Los Angeles meant that IOC members were less likely to elect another American city to host in the near future. American Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage told Matthaëi in 1939 that “there are fifty different countries interested, and that it would be unfair to hold them here so soon again.”<sup>14</sup>

By the mid-1960s, after thirty years of disappointment, most Detroiters had started to accept the idea that the Olympics would not be coming to Detroit, but the push for a municipal stadium continued. Lions owner William Clay Ford was eager to move his football team out of Tiger Stadium, a facility designed specifically for baseball, and wanted Mayor Jerome Cavanagh and the Detroit Common Council to approve funding for the construction of a new stadium more suitable for football. Detroit Tigers owner John Fetzer was willing to listen to offers from stadium planners, but Ford was the driving force behind the plan for a new, modern stadium in Detroit. The Michigan State Fairgrounds, located on the northern edge of Detroit, was one possible location for the new stadium. It was the most popular site among Detroit’s Olympic organizers from the

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<sup>13</sup> “Fabulous Games Bid Made by Detroiters,” *Detroit Free Press*, 16 June 1955.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Avery Brundage, President, American Olympic Committee, to F.C. Matthaëi, president, Detroit Olympic Committee, 25 July 1939, Box 1 Folder 4, Detroit Olympic Committee Collection, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, MI.

1940s to the early 1960s, but ultimately, local business and political leaders united around the idea of a downtown, multi-purpose stadium along the Detroit River.

From 1969 to 1972, Detroit city leaders attempted to gain public approval for a new multi-sport, riverfront stadium in downtown Detroit. Lions owner William Clay Ford threatened to move his team to the suburbs if progress could not be made on a new stadium in Detroit, and some Detroiters thought they might be in danger of losing the Tigers as well. Many residents felt a psychological and emotional connection with their teams and believed that keeping the teams within the city limits was vital to helping Detroit recover from a variety of economic and racial problems. In an editorial on March 17, 1970, the *Detroit Free Press* staff asserted, “Detroit must accept the reality that symbols are important. The illusion that this is money that could or would be spent on other public services is not persuasive. This city must turn itself around, regain its confidence and build for the future.” The editors believed professional teams were economic necessities, claiming that “so far as we are concerned, a part of building for the future is to make the heart of the city a place where people go and enjoy going ....The [stadium-building] committee has been bold. It is the city’s turn now to be bold and get the domed stadium built.”<sup>15</sup> The *Free Press* called on the stadium committee to act decisively in creating an important “symbol” for the city.

Detroit’s attempts to build an Olympic stadium for the better part of four decades and the stadium battle of the late 1960s and early 1970s symbolized the importance that many urban Americans placed on spectator sports during the twentieth century. Spectator sports and the stadiums that hosted them were examples of a democratized

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<sup>15</sup> “Riverfront Stadium Meets the Tests of Practicality,” *Detroit Free Press*, 17 March 1970.

form of urban leisure which grew in size and popularity from the late eighteenth century through World War II. During this period, various urban groups such as women, homosexuals, immigrants, and working-class citizens were able to establish ballparks and other urban spaces as their own cultural spheres, rather than having those spheres determined by traditional “elite” citizens.<sup>16</sup>

Sport stadiums increased in importance among urban citizens throughout the century. Professional sport facilities were frequently categorized as necessary urban infrastructures and equal in economic and cultural importance to theaters, parks, and other sites of urban culture.<sup>17</sup> Like many of these other cultural spaces, professional sport facilities were often designed and promoted in a way to control spectators, emphasize myth, fantasy, and nostalgia, and encourage consumption, much like one would experience in a theme park.<sup>18</sup> This dissertation uses Detroit as a case study in

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<sup>16</sup> See Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); William R. Taylor, ed., *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Steven Riess, *City Games*; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> On the development of urban cultural spaces and cultural production, see Kenneth Fox, *Metropolitan America: Urban Life and Urban Policy in the United States, 1940-1980* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985); Bernard J. Frieden and Lynne B. Sagalyn, *Downtown, Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Jon Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Daniel Bluestone, *Constructing Chicago* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Thomas O'Connor, *Building a New Boston: Politics and Urban Renewal, 1950-1970* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993); Robin Bachin, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> For analyses of theme park planning in urban culture, see Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: HBJ, 1986); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los*

understanding and explaining the role of professional sporting venues in twentieth-century American culture and urban planning.

Team owners could often use their business's lofty cultural status to increase their profits and gain concessions from city leaders, and William Clay Ford and John Fetzer certainly did so. As Detroit grew during the early twentieth century as the center of America's automobile industry, teams like the Tigers built more permanent stadiums than those in which they had previously played. In the late 1960s, however, Ford and Fetzer had to consider Detroit's changing economic and demographic landscape in making business decisions. The effects of deindustrialization and suburban homeownership threatened Detroit's status as the center of Michigan's economy and culture. After the 1967 riot, as Detroiters moved to the suburbs by the thousands, team owners considered following much of their fan base to growing suburbs like Pontiac. Fetzer and Detroit Red Wings owner Bruce Norris decided to keep their teams in Detroit, but William Clay Ford and Detroit Pistons owner William Davidson moved their franchises to the suburban Pontiac Silverdome in the 1970s. Deindustrialization, suburbanization, and racial divisions within Detroit affected team owners in deciding whether to abandon the city, just as those forces affected other industries.

The field of sport history has grown exponentially over the past three decades. Scholars have chronicled major events and developments in sport and recreation while placing them within broad trends in American history. Although most early studies

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*Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990); Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Noonday, 1992); John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992); Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (London, Routledge, 1998); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004).

focused largely on baseball, early sport historians debunked myths associated with the history of sport and demonstrated the usefulness of sport history as a field of scholarly research.<sup>19</sup> Subsequent research has examined other sports—particularly football, soccer, and college athletics—and connected sport history with urban studies, economic history, cultural history, and urban planning.

Sports have constituted a major part of urban culture in America since the nineteenth century. Scholars have examined how sports became such an important element of that culture and have addressed the development of urban sporting culture over the past two centuries.<sup>20</sup> Steven Riess analyzes the evolution of urban sport in the United States, arguing that the growth of organized sport took place over three distinct phases of urbanization: the walking city of the mid-nineteenth century, the radial city of the late nineteenth century, and the era of suburbanization following World War II. During the first phase, a positive sports ideology developed in which many urbanites believed team sports countered the overcrowding, crime, and alienation of cities by building character, improving public health, promoting morality, and bringing rural values to the city.<sup>21</sup> Urban land space became more specialized during the late nineteenth century as cities became more congested, and ordinary citizens and city officials called

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<sup>19</sup> See Harold Seymour, *Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); David Q. Voigt, *American Baseball* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966); Steven Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Peter Levine, *A.G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball: The Promise of American Sport* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the shift from amateur participatory sports to professionalized spectator sports in nineteenth-century New York, see Barth, *City People*; Adelman, *A Sporting Time*.

<sup>21</sup> Riess, *City Games*, 3.

for the acquisition and maintenance of public parks for recreational activities. In the early twentieth century, municipalities constructed public sport stadiums to cater to the growing public interest in spectator sports.<sup>22</sup> After World War II, suburbanization led to battles between urban politicians and suburban leaders over the location of professional sports franchises. Meanwhile, residents of inner city ghettos often lacked the necessary space or equipment for many sports and tended to focus on simple sports which did not require an abundance of land, such as basketball and boxing.<sup>23</sup>

Some recent scholarship has addressed the cultural, economic, and political importance of professional sport stadiums, but many of these studies lack a historical perspective. Debates continue among economists and urban studies experts over the economic impact of new or renovated sport stadiums. Michael Danielson examines the connection between major league sports teams and their cities as well as the economic effects of new professional sport facilities on American cities, particularly the area surrounding those new venues. He asserts that, at best, professional teams and the construction of new stadiums have made “modest contributions to the economies of cities and metropolitan areas” since the 1960s. Likewise, he claims that the social benefits that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 258; Robert Trumpbour argues that the history of stadium building in America can be divided into four main periods. The first involved inexpensive, easily replaceable facilities that reflected the transient nature of most leagues. Teams often moved in the middle of a season, making it unnecessary and unwise to invest significant money in these venues. The second era, according to Trumpbour, occurred in the early twentieth century and was marked by concrete and steel structures that reflected the permanence of many teams in their respective cities. The third era began after World War II as Americans moved into the suburbs and the Sunbelt. New stadiums were built within this demographic shift, often as a way for growing cities in the South and West to lure teams away from their traditional homes in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Finally, Trumpbour claims that the fourth era began in the late 1980s and continues to this day as civic leaders and citizens approved taxpayer subsidies to build new, modern stadiums with luxury boxes and several other new revenue streams for wealthy team owners. See Robert Trumpbour, “Epilogue – Cathedrals of Sport: Reflections on the Past, Present and Future,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* (Sept. 2008), 1583-90.

city leaders associate with professional sports teams are exaggerated and often ignore the class and racial divisions among sports fans.<sup>24</sup> Many politicians, as well as ordinary citizens, are willing to use public funds for the construction of stadiums and ballparks to either establish a new franchise through expansion, lure a team from another city, or keep their own teams from moving away.

Other scholars have come to conclusions similar to Danielson's. Mark Rosentraub finds that the construction of Market Square Arena and the Hoosier Dome in downtown Indianapolis during the 1970s and 1980s had little effect on the gradual exodus of residents from downtown into the surrounding suburbs. He also claims that efforts to stall the flow of suburbanization in Indianapolis had results similar to those cities without downtown stadiums.<sup>25</sup> Dennis Zimmerman asserts that those who directly benefit from new stadiums—the team, nearby businesses, concessions suppliers—should pay for their construction and maintenance, but those costs are usually paid through additional taxes spread out among the population, even if those paying the bills do not

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Danielson, *Home Team: Professional Sports and the American Metropolis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 110-11. For scholarly analyses of the connection between politics and stadium construction and the often exaggerated social and economic benefits of stadium development, see Thomas Hines, "Housing, Baseball, and Creeping Socialism: The Battle of Chavez Ravine, Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban History* (Spring 1982), 123-43; George Lipsitz, "Sports Stadia and Urban Development: A Tale of Three Cities," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (1984), 1-18; Arthur T. Johnson, "The Sports Franchise Relocation Issue and Public Policy Responses," in *Government and Sport: The Public Policy Issues*, ed. Arthur T. Johnson and James H. Frey (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld, 1985); Bruce Kuklick, *To Everything a Season: Shibe Park and Urban Philadelphia, 1909-1976* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Charles A. Euchner, *Playing the Field: Why Sports Teams Move and Cities Fight to Keep Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Kenneth L. Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game: Cities in Pursuit of Sports Franchises, Events, Stadiums, and Arenas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Mark S. Rosentraub, "Stadiums and Urban Space," in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes: The Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Stadiums*, ed. Roger G. Noll and Andrew Zimbalist (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 206.

benefit economically from the facilities.<sup>26</sup> Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist claim that the value in professional sports teams is found in “externalities,” benefits which those who are neither buyers nor sellers accrue through professional sports. Those individuals who find entertainment reading a newspaper about a local sports team or watching a game on television are benefiting from that team and stadium, although those benefits cannot be accurately assessed. The authors argue that politicians and team officials often exaggerate the economic benefits of a new stadium (which are rarely enough to offset public subsidies) but fail to emphasize the value in these externalities.<sup>27</sup> Overall, these studies provide valuable analysis of the economic and social effects of stadium development but fail to provide adequate historical context regarding the construction of sports facilities and urban political economy.

A few scholars have offered a historical perspective to stadium planning and construction which many economic studies lack. Bruce Kuklick’s analysis of the history of Shibe Park in Philadelphia demonstrates the cultural significance of professional ballparks in some urban neighborhoods during the twentieth century. Kuklick examines the link between the ballpark and the surrounding North Philadelphia community as well as the urban politics which led to Shibe Park’s planning, construction, and eventual demolition.<sup>28</sup> Robin Bachin’s *Building the South Side* addresses the political battles over the construction of Comiskey Park in the early 1900s as well as the cultural importance

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<sup>26</sup> Dennis Zimmerman, “Subsidizing Stadiums,” in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes*, 143.

<sup>27</sup> Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist, “Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Facilities,” in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes*, 56-58; For a similar conclusion, see also Andrew Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 123-33.

<sup>28</sup> Kuklick, *To Every Thing a Season*.



which many Chicagoans placed on the ballpark as a site of democratized urban leisure and civic pride.<sup>29</sup> Liam Ford takes a similar analytical approach to the history of Soldier Field in Chicago. Ford argues that Soldier Field arose as a result of political battles and a desire to establish Chicago as a world-class city. The stadium evolved throughout the twentieth century to meet the needs and entertainment demands of Chicagoans, hosting political rallies, sporting events, concerts, and eventually becoming the home of the Chicago Bears football team in 1971. Ford not only addresses the ways in which Soldier Field was used but also the architectural significance, particularly in the public debates over its renovation during the 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Despite these few insightful studies, however, scholars have largely ignored the historical importance of sport stadiums and their place within the social, political, economic and cultural development of urban America.

This dissertation contributes not only to sport history but also to the history of twentieth-century Detroit. The historical literature on Detroit has addressed a wide range of social and political issues. Examinations of the pre-World War II period have analyzed the growth of the black community in Detroit, attempts among blacks to affect change within their own community, and the effects of changing racial demographics on the city as a whole.<sup>31</sup> Donald Finlay Davis illustrates the socioeconomic gaps within the

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<sup>29</sup> Bachin, *Building the South Side*, 205-246.

<sup>30</sup> Liam T.A. Ford, *Soldier Field: A Stadium and Its City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> See Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); For an analysis of the development of Detroit's black community in the nineteenth century, see David Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

city in the early twentieth century and its consequences for Detroit's economic well-being in the ensuing decades.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas Sugrue's seminal study of the structural and individual factors leading to the urban crisis in Detroit demonstrates the significant economic and racial problems in the city during the 1940s and 1950s. Many of these problems escaped the attention of the national press because of the success of the automobile industry and Detroit's population growth throughout the period. Contrary to this façade, Sugrue claims that the urban crisis after 1960 arose because of both structural problems within the American capitalist system, such as deindustrialization in the postwar period, and racial discrimination within Detroit and among national policymakers.<sup>33</sup> Sugrue's study contrasts with earlier examinations of racial problems in Detroit which claim that Detroit's urban crisis only began in earnest during the 1960s after black Detroiters grew more frustrated and angry over repeated incidents of police brutality and racial discrimination, culminating in the 1967 riot.<sup>34</sup> Sugrue views the riot as the apex of racial discrimination and structural inequality which increased over the course of several decades. Recent literature has built upon Sugrue's analysis to examine some of the long-term consequences of the city's racial and economic inequality.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Donald Finlay Davis, *Conspicuous Production: Automobiles and Elites in Detroit, 1899-1933* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 11, 14-15; Joe T. Darden, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Joe T. Darden and Richard W. Thomas, *Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

Detroit's failure to build a municipal stadium during the mid-twentieth century was the result of structural developments, such as deindustrialization and suburbanization, which diminished the city's political, economic, and cultural supremacy within the region, as well as competing interests and decisions among the major individuals and organizations in the stadium planning process. It is a story of hope and excitement, stalemate and frustration. Detroit faced significant challenges and setbacks in the postwar period, and the municipal stadium story symbolizes the complicated history of that era.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “A SPLENDID AID TO CIVIC DEVELOPMENT”: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE DETROIT OLYMPIC COMMITTEE AND THE SEARCH FOR AN OLYMPIC STADIUM SITE

#### **Fred Matthaei and the Establishment of the Detroit Olympic Committee**

The Detroit Olympic Committee began its quest to bring the Olympic Games to Detroit in 1936. Under the direction of Frederick Matthaei, a local industrialist, the DOC developed a comprehensive plan for the construction of Olympic facilities, the renovation of existing facilities to make them suitable for Olympic competition, and the improvement of the city’s infrastructure to support the influx of hundreds of thousands of visitors over a two-week period. In July 1938, Matthaei formally declared to the International Olympic Committee and American Olympic Association Detroit’s intention to host either the 1940 or 1944 Summer Games. Matthaei boasted that the DOC and the city government “have both personnel and funds, second to none, for the proper organization and management of this splendid interprise [sic]—these to be placed at your disposal.”<sup>1</sup>

Fred Matthaei was the leading Olympic booster in Detroit and headed the Detroit Olympic Committee for three decades beginning with the committee’s inception in 1936. He was a prominent industrialist and supported various civic projects in Detroit

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Fred Matthaei, president of Detroit Olympic Committee, to IOC and American Olympic Association, 15 July 1938, Detroit Olympic Committee Records, Box 1 Folder 1.

throughout his life. A graduate of the University of Michigan in 1914 and a university regent from 1960 to 1967, Matthaei established the American Metal Products Co. in 1917 and served as its president and chairman until his retirement in 1958. His wealth allowed him to contribute to several civic causes, notably local athletics. Matthaei established awards and scholarships to University of Michigan athletes, was an honorary member of the Detroit Athletic Club, and even owned a share of the Detroit Lions football team for a short period in the team's early years.<sup>2</sup> As much as he loved contributing his time and wealth to Detroit athletics, though, he focused most on developing a plan to bring the Summer Olympics to his hometown.

Matthaei had a kindred spirit in his desire to bring the Olympics to Detroit. Douglas Roby was a lifelong sportsman with a passion for amateur athletics, although he also contributed to various cultural and civic projects. He played football for the University of Michigan in the early 1920s and for the National Football League's Cleveland Indians. After his football career ended, he worked at Matthaei's American Metal Products Company. He later served on the Detroit Olympic Committee for the city's first several bids and was elected president of the Amateur Athletic Union from 1951 to 1953. Roby became vice president of the United States Olympic Committee in 1953 and became its president in 1965. During his tenure, he lobbied for the USOC to endorse Detroit's bid to host the Olympics. From the 1930s to the late 1960s, Roby and Matthaei worked together to make Detroit's Olympic dream a reality.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Regent-Emeritus Fred Matthaei Dies," *Ann Arbor News*, 26 Mar 1973, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Biography of Douglas F. Roby, Douglas F. Roby Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Matthaei, Roby, and the Detroit Olympic Committee made bids to host each Summer Olympiad from 1940 to 1972 and were rejected by the IOC in every case. The reasons for Detroit's failure to bring the Games to the Motor City were complex and varied. Part of the explanation lies in circumstances beyond the control of Matthaei and the DOC, such as the cancellation of two separate Olympiads during World War II, IOC members voting against the proposals of American cities, and the refusal of some American bidders to withdraw after the USOC gave its support to Detroit. Other factors, however, can be blamed on the planning of the DOC and city officials. During Detroit's various presentations to the IOC, Matthaei stressed the modern amenities and aesthetics of the proposed Olympic stadium, but other cities already had nearly all of the facilities necessary to host the Games. Also, in several of the IOC meetings in which bids were determined, DOC officials made enemies when they accused the IOC and representatives of other cities of corruption and violating the spirit of the Olympic movement.<sup>4</sup>

The biggest reason for Detroit's lack of success in hosting the Olympics, however, was simply unfortunate timing on the part of Matthaei and the DOC. Detroit became a serious contender to host the Summer Olympics in the late 1930s after the establishment of the DOC. Matthaei poured thousands of dollars of his own personal fortune into the endeavor, and he helped organize several subcommittees which would quickly develop a cohesive plan for Matthaei to present to the IOC. But developments on the international stage and the beginning of World War II stalled Detroit's Olympic efforts almost before they began. By the time Matthaei and the DOC came up with an organized plan, Tokyo had already been awarded the 1940 Games. IOC officials

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<sup>4</sup> "Cash Does All Talking in Olympic Bidding -- Matthaei," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 May 1949, p. 22.

reconsidered giving the Olympics to Japan throughout 1938 and 1939 as the Japanese were gaining a reputation throughout the world for aggression and warmongering. The Japanese army invaded Manchuria in 1931 and made several other belligerent moves during the 1930s. The IOC awarded Tokyo the 1940 Games partly as an appeasement move to try to keep Japan within the international community.<sup>5</sup> Soon after, though, Japan continued its imperial aggression, particularly against China in the Second Sino-Japanese War. In 1938, Japanese military officials and IOC members agreed that a new host city should be determined for the 1940 Summer Games.<sup>6</sup>

Fred Matthaei jumped at the chance to bring the Olympics to Detroit just a few years after organizing the Detroit Olympic Committee. In July 1938, Matthaei sent letters to the IOC and the American Olympic Association, asking them to consider Detroit as a contender for the 1940 bid. Matthaei realized that Detroit was still relatively new to the Olympic scene, and he assured Olympic officials that he was “fully cognizant of the manifold responsibilities attendant upon the success of these Games.” He also recognized the massive amounts of dollars and labor required to stage the Summer Games, explaining that the DOC was aware of “the tremendous expense necessary in the proper preparation and manner which would do credit to the successful participation. In brief, we have both personnel and funds, second to none, for the proper organization and

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<sup>5</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, 10 June 1939, p. 14; The IOC made similarly debatable decisions in awarding the 1944 Winter Olympics to Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy, and relocated the 1940 Winter Olympics from St. Moritz, Switzerland, to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.

<sup>6</sup> “Tokyo Cancels an Invitation,” *New York Times*, 15 Jul 1938, p. 16.

management of this splendid interprise [sic]—these to be placed at your disposal.”<sup>7</sup>

Matthaei was delivering his best sales pitch to the IOC, despite the fact that Detroit had no stadium suitable for the staging of the largest and most popular events.

Unfortunately for Matthaei and his committee, the IOC awarded the 1940 Olympics to Helsinki instead. Representatives of the Finnish capital had been working toward a successful Olympic bid for several years, and the city finished second to Tokyo in the original voting for the 1940 Games. The preparations for the 1940 Olympiad ended up being all for naught, as the outbreak of war in Europe led to its cancellation. In late October 1939, as the war spread across Europe, the American press was reporting that Detroit would be named host of the 1940 games if Helsinki were unable to do so, although some IOC members denied that an official decision had been made. Detroit Mayor Richard Reading declared that his city would welcome the opportunity, but Fred Matthaei felt his committee would not have enough time to prepare to host the following year.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless, the war led to the cancellation of the 1940 Olympic Games. Once the Soviet Union invaded Finland in November 1939, it became impossible for Helsinki to continue its preparations to host the games the following year. The war also prevented athletes from traveling safely across the Atlantic to a potential American host city. Count Henri Baillet-Latour, president of the IOC, announced on December 2, 1939 that the

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Fred Matthaei, president of Detroit Olympic Committee, to IOC and American Olympic Association, 15 July 1938, Detroit Olympic Committee Records, Box 1 Folder 1.

<sup>8</sup> “Detroit Is In Line for 1940 Olympics,” *New York Times*, 30 Oct 1939.



Olympics were cancelled for the following year.<sup>9</sup> Detroit's Olympic dream would have to wait until at least 1944, provided that the war ended by that time. But the fact that Helsinki had been awarded the 1940 Games would impede Detroit's efforts to win over IOC voters during the post-war period. In the eyes of some IOC members, Helsinki effectively "deserved" to host the Olympics following the conclusion of the war.

World War II certainly obstructed Matthaei and the DOC in their attempts to bring the Olympics to the Motor City, but they likely would have failed during the 1930s and 1940s even without the war. Los Angeles hosted the Olympics in 1932, becoming the second American city to host the Games in their rather short history.<sup>10</sup> Using the local resources of Hollywood to publicize and celebrate the city's Olympic spirit, the Los Angeles Olympiad became the most successful Summer Olympics to date and demonstrated America's strength and determination during the dark years of the Great Depression.<sup>11</sup> Los Angeles's Olympic organizers emphasized the unique aspects of the city in order to present the 1932 games as a type of event which had never been staged before. In contrast, planners of previous Olympics focused on promoting particular athletic events and athletes. The Los Angeles games represented a historical turning point in which each Olympiad became a "spectacle" or "mega-event," thus drawing in casual observers in addition to sporting enthusiasts.<sup>12</sup> Its shadow would loom large over

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<sup>9</sup> "Olympic Games Listed for 1940 Cancelled, Count Baillet-Latour Reveals in Brussels," *New York Times*, 3 Dec 1939.

<sup>10</sup> St. Louis hosted the III Olympiad in 1904.

<sup>11</sup> Sean Dinces, "Padres on Mount Olympus: Los Angeles and the Production of the 1932 Olympic Mega-Event," *Journal of Sport History* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 138-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

the Detroit Olympic Committee in the ensuing decades as Matthaei and his colleagues tried to bring the Summer Games back to the United States.

After the IOC voted to award the 1944 Olympics to London, Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Association, explained to Matthaei that Detroit's loss was "not due to any deficiency on the part of either your city or your invitation. It was solely because of the fact that the Games were held in the United States in 1932, that there are fifty different countries interested, and that it would be unfair to hold them here so soon again."<sup>13</sup> At this point, there was little Matthaei or any other supporters of Detroit could do to change the mind of IOC voters. American cities would have to wait their turn and give other nations a chance to host (particularly European nations) before the Games would come back across the Atlantic.

That Los Angeles hosted the Olympics in 1932 certainly impeded the DOC's efforts, but it was connected to an unwritten rule of determining Olympic host cities which had just as much effect on Detroit's failure to garner enough IOC votes. Since the establishment of the modern Olympic Games in 1896, the IOC adhered to a rule established by IOC founder Pierre de Coubertin that two out of every three Olympiads would take place in Europe. Only twice were the Olympics held outside of Europe before 1940.<sup>14</sup> When Los Angeles won the 1932 bid, it effectively doomed other American cities hoping for a successful bid in 1936 or 1940.

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Avery Brundage, President, American Olympic Committee, to F.C. Matthaei, president, Detroit Olympic Committee, 25 July 1939, DOC Records, Box 1 Folder 4.

<sup>14</sup> Both in the United States; St. Louis in 1904, Los Angeles in 1932.

### **To Build or Not to Build: The Stadium Debate Begins**

Despite the significant obstacles facing the Detroit Olympic Committee, Matthaei and his associates continued working to bring the Olympics to Detroit. Since the establishment of the DOC in 1937, the planning and construction of an Olympic stadium was one of the central components of the committee's Olympic preparations. Matthaei understood the symbolic and practical importance of a central facility in which the biggest Olympic events could be staged. Detroit had a few stadiums and arenas scattered throughout the city, but none had the capacity or grandeur necessary for the staging of opening and closing ceremonies, track and field events, and other competitions capable of drawing large crowds. Briggs Stadium, the home of baseball's Detroit Tigers located in the Corktown neighborhood just northwest of downtown, gradually increased its capacity since its construction in 1912. Originally designed to hold about 23,000 spectators, team owner Frank Navin added a grandstand in 1923, bringing the total seats to nearly 30,000.<sup>15</sup> In 1938, the new owner of the Tigers, Walter Briggs, ordered the further addition of seats by wrapping the second deck around the entire playing field. This final expansion set the stadium's seating capacity at approximately 55,000 seats in 1938, still far short of the 100,000-seat stadium Matthaei and the DOC wanted.<sup>16</sup>

Other sport facilities throughout the city were adequate for many of the less popular Olympic competitions but were too small to host the major events. The Olympia, located along Grand River Avenue about four miles northwest of the downtown

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<sup>15</sup> "Navin Field Gates Open Today if Weather Permits," *Detroit Free Press*, 18 Apr 1912, p. 10; "Record Attendance to Witness Opener," *Detroit Free Press*, 26 Apr 1923, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> "Tigers Beaten as Crowd Sets a City Record," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 Apr 1938, p. 1.

riverfront, was a useful venue for some of the smaller Olympic events but could hold only about 15,000 spectators. George Graves, one of the original members of the Detroit Olympic Committee, suggested that the Olympia be used for evening events such as wrestling, boxing, and weightlifting. Since the Olympia was a closed-roof facility, organizers could schedule events better suited for indoor competition.<sup>17</sup> The University of Detroit Stadium was considered as a possible host of cycling events, but its capacity of 21,000 was far too small for the major outdoor sports.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the University of Michigan football stadium was certainly large enough to serve as the main Olympic stadium, but Detroit's Olympic organizers wanted the main spectacle of the games to be within the city limits, not forty miles away in Ann Arbor, and they never seriously considered it as a site for the opening and closing ceremonies.

The American Olympic Association (later renamed the United States Olympic Committee) made clear its preference to recommend cities to the IOC which had the necessary facilities to stage the Olympic Games. In one of the earliest meetings of Detroit's Olympic organizers, George Graves stated that "the International Olympic Committee is first interested in a City's ability to properly conduct the Olympic Games, and to provide adequate facilities for the Athletes."<sup>19</sup> Of less concern to the IOC and AOA was a city's reputation, size, etc. Both the 1932 Los Angeles games and the 1936

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<sup>17</sup> Information Packet on Olympic proposals, from George Graves, member of Executive Committee, American Olympic Association, to the Special Committee on the Olympic Games for the City of Detroit, Michigan," 20 September 1937, DOC collection, Box 1 Folder 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Information Packet on Olympic proposals, from George Graves, member of Executive Committee, American Olympic Association, to the Special Committee on the Olympic Games for the City of Detroit, Michigan," 20 September 1937, DOC collection, Box 1 Folder 1.

Berlin games boasted massive stadiums for the major Olympic events and ceremonies. In Los Angeles, as Olympic boosters projected the highest attendance in Olympic history, the Coliseum was renovated to increase its capacity to 105,000.<sup>20</sup> *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler promised substantial revenues to the city if organizers were willing to spend money on improving Olympic facilities.<sup>21</sup>

Four years later, Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime devoted a considerable sum of money—at least twenty-seven million marks—to the construction of an Olympic stadium. Unlike Los Angeles's organizers, Hitler wanted to build an Olympic stadium from scratch rather than renovate an existing facility. He wanted a facility which would dwarf any other stadium in the world, but the finished product ended up being roughly the same size as the Olympic stadium in Los Angeles.<sup>22</sup> Also, because of Hitler's hatred of modern architecture, stadium architect Werner March was ordered to use limestone instead of steel and apply expensive ornamentation and wide columns to the outer walls to signify the power of the Reich.<sup>23</sup> The spectacle of the Los Angeles and Berlin games forced subsequent Olympic cities to meet or exceed the expectations of the IOC that host cities provide extravagant facilities for the staging of Olympic events, especially the opening and closing ceremonies.

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<sup>20</sup> John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, "From A to B: The Summer Olympics, 1896-2008," in *Olympic Cities: City Agendas, Planning and the World's Games, 1896-2016*, ed. John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold (New York: Routledge, 2011), 32.

<sup>21</sup> David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 52-3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

Political factors certainly had some influence on the decisions of the IOC throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but if a city like Detroit could provide facilities, amenities, and infrastructure deemed acceptable by the IOC, it would at least have a slim chance of winning an Olympic bid. Operating under such a premise, Matthaei and the DOC continued their plans to build a massive stadium within Detroit's city limits. In July 1938, Matthaei asserted that Detroit would have to build a 100,000-seat stadium and a new swimming complex capable of holding 16,000 spectators.<sup>24</sup> The main stadium would be used for the opening and closing ceremonies, track and field, field hockey, lacrosse, gymnastics, and football.<sup>25</sup>

From 1940 to early 1944, no major plans were made by the International Olympic Committee or the Detroit Olympic Committee to determine a course of action for post-war Olympic contests. Detroit became the "Arsenal of Democracy," its assembly plants and manufacturers shifting to wartime production. As was the case across the country, Detroiters rationed their consumption to maximize the amount of resources available for the war effort. Projects such as stadium construction would have been viewed as frivolous when compared to protecting democracy and defeating Hitler. Also, many members of the DOC, including Fred Matthaei, owned or managed industrial companies, and their attention shifted to war production from the late 1930s until the war ended in 1945. During this period, the DOC all but disbanded, leaving its Olympic work for a more peaceful time.

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<sup>24</sup> "Olympic Games Committee," Meeting Notes, 18 July 1938, DOC collection, Box 1 Folder 2.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Fred Matthaei to J.B. Mills, J.L. Hudson Co., 10 August 1938, DOC collection, Box 1 Folder 3.

After the war ended, the IOC, USOC, and Detroit Olympic Committee resumed their efforts to plan and stage future Olympiads. By 1947, Detroit shifted back to peacetime production, and major sporting events like the Olympics returned to their normal schedules. The IOC had already awarded the 1948 games to London. Many IOC members felt the revenue brought into the city by the Olympics could help London recover following the destruction it faced during the war. The British Olympic Council warned, though, that no new Olympic facilities could be built, and only necessary improvements to existing stadiums would be allowed. In light of London's myriad rebuilding projects, the Council claimed that it would be "most undesirable to build a new Olympic stadium under present conditions."<sup>26</sup> German bombings of London during the war and the post-war economic crisis in Europe prevented London's Olympic organizers from building an Olympic stadium and Olympic village on the level of those constructed in Berlin in 1936.

### **Choosing a Stadium Site**

After the IOC chose London as the 1948 host city, Matthaei and the DOC lobbied for the USOC and the IOC to award the 1952 games to the Motor City. Planning and designing the stadium could not move forward, though, until the location of an Olympic stadium was determined. Several different locations throughout the city were discussed since the inception of the DOC, but a select few stood out as the major contenders. Wayne University (later renamed Wayne State University) stood in the heart of Detroit's Midtown neighborhood, had land that could be made available for stadium construction, and needed new athletic facilities for its student body. Rouge Park was closer to some of

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<sup>26</sup> "London Host City to 1948 Olympics," *New York Times*, 15 Feb 1946, p. 31.

Detroit's suburbs on the western end of the city, surrounded by Livonia to the west and Dearborn to the south. The State Fairgrounds, meanwhile, were located along the northern border of the city at Eight Mile Road, just south of Ferndale. The Fairgrounds site was particularly notable because of its location on the outskirts of the city proper, and making it accessible to metropolitan Detroit's growing suburban population. Each proposed location offered specific benefits to the DOC as the future site of an Olympic Stadium.

Wayne University became a major contender as a possible location for the proposed Olympic stadium by the late 1940s. In October 1948, the Detroit Olympic Organizing Committee's executive committee met to discuss the benefits and drawbacks to each potential stadium location. Committee member Willis Hall reported that the city's Planning Commission favored Wayne University as the stadium site as long as it was a closed, heated, all-purpose stadium. Hall explained that the major reasons behind the Planning Commission's decision were Wayne's central location within the city, available land owned by the University, and the stadium's place within existing efforts to develop a cultural center around the university. Hall also explained that a stadium located near the University would displace "only 72 families at present."<sup>27</sup> Forcing citizens to relocate and potentially razing homes seemed to be of at least some concern to stadium planners.

Wayne University leaders supported the idea of building a stadium on or near the campus. The main location being discussed was at the intersection of the Lodge and Ford

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<sup>27</sup> Minutes, Executive Committee Meeting, Detroit Olympic Organizing Committee, 8 October 1948, DOC collection, Box 6 Folder 1.



freeways, near the university's main campus. University vice president John Richards claimed that a nearby Olympic stadium "would be of tremendous help to the university. We think of it, however, as being a splendid aid to civic development. We see that a structure such as this will bring to Detroit many national meetings."<sup>28</sup> The university was part of a civic and cultural district in the city's Midtown neighborhood that included the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Detroit Public Library, the Detroit Historical Museum, and the Max M. Fisher Music Center, home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Richards believed an Olympic stadium could contribute another valuable element to the cultural and civic environment already in the neighborhood.

Wayne University alumni also supported the construction of a stadium near their alma mater. The board of directors of the university's alumni association issued a resolution that they would "favor the establishment of Olympic facilities, if the Olympic Games are awarded to Detroit, at a location near to the Wayne University area."<sup>29</sup> Further, the resolution stated that the Olympic stadium "would also provide athletic space sorely needed by thousands of students at Wayne University, which will have to be furnished by the City in the immediate future."<sup>30</sup> The stadium could have served two important purposes. It could have provided a central arena for the staging of the Olympic Games and given the university a modern sporting facility after the conclusion of the Olympics. Construction costs would have been partially covered by revenues from

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<sup>28</sup> Meeting of Olympic Organizing Committee, October 11, 1948, DOC collection, Box 6 Folder 1.

<sup>29</sup> Resolution, Board of Directors, Wayne University Alumni Association, Robert L. Pryor, President, Proposed Olympic Facilities, no date available, DOC collection, Box 3 Folder 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Olympic spectators, rather than having the city pay for the entire cost of a new university facility.

One question still to be addressed, though, was whether the stadium would conform to the neighborhood's architectural and aesthetic environment. The Detroit Institute of Arts and the Detroit Public Library were constructed in the 1920s as part of the "City Beautiful" movement.<sup>31</sup> Both structures represented the Beaux-Arts, Italian Renaissance style, with their massive, arched windows and grand entrances. Any Olympic stadium constructed nearby needed to incorporate some of those same architectural styles and details or risk being labeled an eyesore within one of Detroit's most highly-regarded neighborhoods. Further, the planners and architects of the Detroit Public Library and the Detroit Institute of Arts wanted to maintain an atmosphere of high culture and hoped to prevent the surrounding neighborhood from becoming commercialized.<sup>32</sup> A mammoth civic stadium undoubtedly denotes a certain level of commercialism, but adhering to classical architectural form could have lessened the contradictory nature of the buildings.

Members of the City Plan Commission did not necessarily think the Wayne University site was the best location for a large stadium. If stadium planners and Olympic organizers decided to build an open-air stadium, the City Plan Commission

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<sup>31</sup> Detroit was among several American cities which incorporated Beaux-Arts architecture into its new public facilities during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Much of the success and endurance of the City Beautiful movement stems from the popularity of Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. The "White City" sparked a revived interest in classical architecture, and city leaders throughout the country believed such architecture could demonstrate the grandeur and cultural significance of their respective cities.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel M. Bluestone, "Detroit's City Beautiful and the Problem of Commerce," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 47, no. 3 (Sept. 1988), 258-62.

favored the Rouge Park location on the city's west side.<sup>33</sup> The reason for the different recommendations was a matter of scale and attendance. A closed-roof stadium would have allowed for year-round events and required more land for parking than an open-air facility because of the expected increase in attendance for an enclosed park. Wayne University had the available land for such a structure, but if the City Plan Commission preferred this site over the others, they would have recommended it as the site for an open-air stadium as well. That they recommended Rouge Park demonstrates their preference for that site over Wayne University, possibly because of Rouge Park's proximity to the west suburbs. Wayne was simply a more practical site for a larger structure with more land for parking.

Another factor affecting the decisions of stadium planners was the possible removal of citizens from their homes to make room for the new structure, although some civic leaders argued that demolishing substandard or dilapidated homes could actually benefit the city overall. Wayne's Executive Vice President John Richards acknowledged that the razing of nearby housing and relocation of families would be unfortunate, but he claimed that "the housing that surrounds this area is substandard and much of it could be acquired on a systematic basis without great cost."<sup>34</sup> His comments ignored the problem of where displaced citizens would find housing after being evicted from the neighborhood. Richards also argued that "the proper location of public facilities within a city as large as Detroit requires courageous and costly moves and that in pursuing their

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<sup>33</sup> Meeting of Olympic Organizing Committee, 11 October 1948, DOC collection, Box 6 Folder 1.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from John Richards, Exec VP, Wayne Univ., to Fred Matthaei, 2 September 1948, DOC collection, Box 6 Folder 4.

larger goals the public agencies necessarily cause some painful readjustments.”<sup>35</sup> His appraisal echoed the sentiments of many urban planners during the immediate postwar period regarding urban blight.

Urban blight was viewed as a threat to the overall well-being of a city, and city planners believed that eliminating blight, although distressing for those families thrown out of their homes, would make a positive contribution to the social and economic health of the entire city. Further, some planners argued that replacing blighted areas with private businesses or middle-class housing would result in increased tax revenues for the city and better living conditions for lower-class citizens through public housing projects.<sup>36</sup> But the process of eliminating urban blight entailed a few major problems. First, low-income residents, mainly black, were forced out of their homes and neighborhoods in the name of slum clearance. Many civic leaders, including those in Detroit, failed to adequately consider the hardship displaced residents would endure. Also, as residents were evicted from areas designated as “blighted,” planners expected that these citizens would move into public housing projects throughout the city. But white residents resisted the construction of public housing and low-cost apartment buildings in their neighborhoods. Politicians succumbed to pressure from their constituents and usually built public housing in already overcrowded neighborhoods

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 49-50; Arnold Hirsch analyzes a similar situation in postwar Chicago. Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 100-34.

within the city's Black Belt.<sup>37</sup> The process of slum clearance, therefore, exacerbated the plight of inner-city minorities.

The efforts of Detroit's stadium planners and civic leaders to clear the city's slums and make room for redevelopment projects were echoed in other major American cities throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The U.S. Housing Act of 1949 presented cities with an opportunity to secure federal funds for urban redevelopment, later described as urban renewal. A steady exodus of urban residents to the suburbs during the 1930s and 1940s, largely a result of Federal Housing Administration policies encouraging homeownership, led city officials throughout the country to try to counteract those policies and convince middle-class residents that the central city offered benefits that suburbia could not. Under the terms of the Housing Act of 1949, municipal governments could apply eminent domain to designated "slum" areas and use federal funds for slum clearance. That land could then be sold to private developers who would replace those slums with commercial centers, upper and middle-class housing, and other projects intended to boost the urban economy and convince middle-class whites to live in the city.<sup>38</sup>

Municipal leaders in several U.S. cities took advantage of available federal funds under the 1949 Housing Act, but none more so than New York, led by its chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance, Robert Moses. Moses took a pragmatic approach to urban renewal and made decisions that he believed would benefit the city as

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<sup>37</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, p. 50-52.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7-8.

a whole, rather than consider the effects his decisions had on particular neighborhoods. He was energetic and forward-thinking, and through his efforts, New York was able to secure more than twice as much federal funding under the Housing Act than any other city.<sup>39</sup> While Moses was forced to resign as chairman of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance in 1960 and was vilified as an uncaring bureaucrat who was willing to destroy homes and neighborhoods through his exertion of seemingly unchecked power, he was simply more effective than his counterparts in other cities in balancing various municipal and federal committees to carry urban renewal projects through to completion.<sup>40</sup>

Detroit's municipal leadership lacked anyone as determined or powerful as Robert Moses when it came to urban renewal. Whereas Moses was decisive in his planning strategy and extremely successful in securing public funds, Detroit's civic leaders and stadium planners could not agree on the best location for an Olympic stadium. Wayne University and Rouge Park presented logistical problems that organizers were unwilling to address or unable to solve. Building the stadium near Wayne required the removal of dozens of families from their homes without a reasonable housing alternative, and the Rouge Park location did not offer enough available land for a closed-roof stadium, parking lots, access roads, and an Olympic Village. By the mid-1950s, Olympic stadium

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<sup>39</sup> Hilary Ballon, "Robert Moses and Urban Renewal," in *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, eds. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 94.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*; Moses's standing among urban planners and historians has bounced back in recent years. Hilary Ballon argues that Moses, while certainly a powerful figure in the history of New York, faced significant obstacles in managing various partnerships with the federal government, private developers, and municipal agencies. Ballon also claims that Moses had a "coherent and intelligent plan," as well as a "strategic vision" for New York which focused on fighting back against the forces of decentralization and suburbanization that had drawn capital and people from the central city over several decades.

planners shifted most of their attention toward the State Fairgrounds site on the northern border of the city near the intersection of Eight Mile and Woodward. The Fairgrounds site had more available land than the Rouge Park location and DOC organizers thought they could convince the Michigan legislature to support the project since it would improve the value of state property and provide a boost to the Michigan State Fair.

At the first meeting of the Detroit Olympic Organizing Committee in September 1948, Detroit Mayor Eugene Van Antwerp declared that the State Fairgrounds site was an ideal location for the staging of an Olympic Village and, possibly, some of the Olympic events.<sup>41</sup> Detroiters, Michigan residents, and visitors would have easy access to the Fairgrounds. The site was accessible by public transportation and private automobile, a particularly important consideration for the main showcase for the Games. It also had sufficient space for spectator parking, the lack of which was one of the main drawbacks to the Rouge Park location.

In Van Antwerp's estimation, the Fairgrounds site was also the ideal location for a stadium because no existing neighborhoods or homes would be destroyed. He claimed that "the selection of a site that would require the razing of houses would aggravate the housing condition in a most serious degree."<sup>42</sup> Detroit already had a serious housing problem by 1948. An influx of southern migrants seeking jobs during World War II contributed to a contested labor market in which blacks, southern white migrants, and low-income ethnic Detroiters competed for positions in Detroit's war production

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<sup>41</sup> Initial Meeting of the Detroit Olympic Organizing Committee, 21 September 1948, Mayor Van Antwerp, Box 6 Folder 1, DOC collection.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

industries. In turn, this flood of new residents led to a housing shortage which the city tried to alleviate for much of the decade.<sup>43</sup>

Many white citizens viewed blacks as a threat to their livelihoods and their neighborhoods. The competitive labor market and the housing crisis exacerbated racial tensions throughout the city as whites refused to allow black citizens into their neighborhoods and the Common Council looked for suitable locations for public housing projects. In 1942, white residents took up arms to prevent blacks from moving into the newly-opened Sojourner Truth housing project. The project had originally been intended to house only white defense workers so as not to disrupt the racial homogeneity of the largely Polish neighborhood, but when plans for a second all-black project fell through, the Sojourner Truth housing project was opened to all races. White neighborhood residents threatened black families that tried to move in, Detroit police officers made the conflict worse by harassing many of the black residents rather than protecting them, and the Michigan National Guard was called in to restore order.<sup>44</sup> Any projects that made Detroit's housing problems worse, such as families being evicted to make room for a civic stadium, would be closely scrutinized. Detroit's political leaders tried to walk a fine line between appeasing the largely white electorate and providing needed services to black Detroiters.

In the context of Detroit's growing class and racial divisions, Fred Matthaei and Olympic organizers needed to choose a stadium location in which they could maintain

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<sup>43</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 38-40.

<sup>44</sup> Dominic Capeci, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).



political support and avoid being drawn into racial and economic battles which would only delay the stadium project further. The Fairgrounds site seemed the best available spot to steer clear of those issues, and it provided the DOC with more available land than Wayne University, Rouge Park, and some of the other proposed locations. Soon after the decision to focus on the Fairgrounds site for stadium construction, the DOC received the political support it needed to complete the project. The Detroit Common Council issued a resolution stating that the city was “firmly committed to the providing of the necessary facilities and such financing therefor in cooperation with other public and private groups as may prove to be reasonable and necessary to the end that the Olympic Games, when held here, will be the outstanding success deserving of this the foremost of all international events.”<sup>45</sup> The resolution provided no details in the amount of financial or political support the Common Council would provide. Nevertheless, it was an official statement which gave Matthaei and the DOC the confidence and conviction to press forward with plans to build the stadium at the Fairgrounds.

### **Olympic Politics**

Despite the assurance of financial support from the Common Council, the DOC still had no such assurances that the International Olympic Committee would ever award a Summer Olympiad to the Motor City. Matthaei and his colleagues had worked toward an Olympic bid for more than a decade. Yet, Detroit seemed no closer to hosting the Games than it was in 1937. Regardless, the DOC pressed forward with its efforts to secure the Summer Games for Detroit. In April 1949, the committee traveled to Rome

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<sup>45</sup> Resolution of Common Council to provide support to the construction and financing of Olympic facilities, 9 December 1948, DOC collection, Box 6 Folder 5.

along with Mayor Van Antwerp and several other officials to present their case to the IOC for the 1956 Olympiad. A United Press article reported just before the week-long meeting started that Detroit was “believed to have the inside track” on winning the Games.<sup>46</sup> The main competition for the DOC came from Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Melbourne.<sup>47</sup> Since London hosted the 1948 Olympics and the 1952 Games went to Helsinki, the IOC was free to choose a non-European city for the 1956 Games since it had satisfied its unofficial rule that two out of every three Olympics must take place in a European city.

But even with this barrier out of Detroit’s way, the city faced an even greater obstacle from its fellow American delegations. Los Angeles and Minneapolis remained in the final bidding despite the United States Olympic Association (later renamed the United States Olympic Committee) giving its support to Detroit. The USOA voted in June 1948 that Detroit should be the sole American finalist for the 1956 Games. In 1947, the IOC held its final vote on the 1952 Games and awarded them to Helsinki, as votes for American cities were split among Los Angeles, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Chicago.<sup>48</sup> The total American votes tied Helsinki, meaning that having just one American finalist might have affected the outcome of the vote. In a December 1947 USOA meeting, just six months after the IOC meetings, one USOA member from Detroit asked, “Why do we have to send five cities over to confuse them? Those thoughts were expressed by the International Olympic Committee. I can see their point of view...I think it is better to

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<sup>46</sup> “’56 Olympic Talks Near,” *Detroit Free Press*, 21 Apr 1949, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> “Helsinki Gets ’52 Olympic Games,” *Detroit Free Press*, 22 June 1947.

decide the question here at home and then go over there and concentrate on one particular city.”<sup>49</sup>

The USOA hoped to avoid such an embarrassing division in further Olympic votes. They decided that only one American city would be officially designated as the choice of the U.S. Olympic Association.<sup>50</sup> On July 10, 1948, USOA president Avery Brundage announced that Detroit had the official backing of the USOA for the 1956 Summer Games.<sup>51</sup> Choosing one American city to present its case to the IOC solved two problems with previous Olympic bids. First, it eliminated the competition between American cities in the final voting process, giving the chosen city a more realistic chance of acquiring the needed number of votes. Second, it allowed the chosen city’s representatives to focus their attention on how their proposal compared to those of the international cities. One of the major strengths the various American representatives believed they had was the United States’ role as a global leader. That advantage disappeared when competing against the bids of fellow American cities.

As a result of the USOA vote, Matthaei and the DOC assumed Detroit would be the lone American city bidding for the 1956 Games. The DOC even had statements of support from President Truman and the United States Congress.<sup>52</sup> But Chicago, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia ignored the USOA’s decision and presented their bids to the IOC anyway. Representatives of the Minneapolis and Los Angeles

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<sup>49</sup> Transcript from USOC meeting, 3 December 1947, DOC collection, Box 6 Folder 5.

<sup>50</sup> “Detroit Makes Bid for 1956 Olympics,” *The New York Times*, 11 Jul 1948.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> “Detroit Olympic Bid Dimmed by Squabble Among U.S. Cities,” *Detroit Free Press*.

contingents argued that they kept their cities in the bidding because they thought Detroit had neither a solid financial plan nor adequate facilities to support the execution of the Games.<sup>53</sup> Staging an Olympiad cost an estimated twenty million dollars, and Detroit could not even boast a central stadium in which to host the major competitions and the opening and closing ceremonies. In response, Douglas Roby, a Detroit businessman and one of the leading figures on the DOC, said, “Award us the Olympics and then we’ll promptly show that we have the means for financing the building program the Games will require.”<sup>54</sup> Much of the DOC’s proposal revolved around plans to build facilities, intentions to raise the necessary funds, and promises to follow through on these actions if the city’s bid was accepted. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that Los Angeles and the other American delegations were skeptical of Detroit’s ability to prepare for the 1956 Games.

Nevertheless, the Detroit Olympic Committee pressed forward. At the IOC meetings in Rome in April 1949, Detroit gained support from an unlikely source. Lord Aberdale, a British delegate to the IOC, argued in favor of staging the next several Olympiads in North America, South America, and Australia. He thought this would give non-Europeans a better opportunity to see the Olympics and would help increase the popularity of the Olympics throughout the world.<sup>55</sup> When asked about Detroit’s bid, he

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<sup>53</sup> “No Cash, No Games for Detroit in ’56,” *Detroit Free Press*, 30 Apr 1949; “Payoff Near in Detroit’s Long Olympic Vigil,” *Detroit Free Press*, 24 Apr 1949.

<sup>54</sup> “Payoff Near in Detroit’s Long Olympic Vigil,” *Detroit Free Press*, 24 Apr 1949.

<sup>55</sup> “British Give Detroit Boost for Olympics,” *Detroit Free Press*, 25 Apr 1949.

claimed that it was “the strongest one from its part of the world.”<sup>56</sup> Aberdale seemed unconcerned with Detroit’s lack of facilities and looked instead at its entire proposal and the fact that the DOC had worked for more than a decade toward bringing the Olympics to Detroit.

When the final votes were tallied four days later, though, Melbourne easily won the voting over the seven other finalists. Only two delegates out of a total of forty-one voted for Detroit in the first round. Los Angeles had seven votes, the most of any American city in the first round, but was eliminated from consideration shortly thereafter. Most of the IOC votes went to Melbourne and Buenos Aires, indicating that the IOC strongly preferred an Olympiad in the Southern Hemisphere over the United States. Mayor Van Antwerp blamed a “voting bloc” in the IOC for Detroit’s loss. He acknowledged, “The Committee appeared determined—as we learned later—to send the games below the Equator. They had never gone to the regions of the lower hemisphere.” He conceded that “it didn’t make any difference how good we were—we were bound to lose.”<sup>57</sup> In Van Antwerp’s estimation, Detroit could have had all necessary facilities and a strong financial strategy, and the city still would have been denied in its Olympic quest. Detroit was doomed by geography.

Matthaei, though, reacted to the voting results more cynically than Van Antwerp. He argued that corruption and greed among IOC officials had the greatest effect on the voting results. The Olympics were intended to be the prime showcase of amateur competition and sportsmanship, but IOC members were now allowing money to corrupt

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<sup>56</sup> “British Give Detroit Boost for Olympics,” *Detroit Free Press*, 25 Apr 1949.

<sup>57</sup> “Van Antwerp Blames Bloc for Detroit’s Defeat,” *Detroit Free Press*, 29 Apr 1949.

those ideals. Matthaei criticized the IOC for “straying from the original ideals of the Games.”<sup>58</sup> In Buenos Aires, Argentine President Juan Peron promised to set aside thirty million dollars for staging the games. Melbourne, the winning city, promised to pay travel expenses for all IOC members and their guests. Matthaei refused to give up his Olympic dream for Detroit, but he lamented that the 1956 vote was probably the best opportunity the Motor City was going to have to win the Olympics.<sup>59</sup>

The loss of yet another Olympics vote did little to diminish the support of Detroit’s mainstream press. A *Free Press* editorial immediately following the IOC meetings lauded the Detroit Olympic committee, commenting that “the long and intensive campaign to get the Games for Detroit was the result of untiring and unselfish effort and hard work on the part of a large number of civic leaders.”<sup>60</sup> Singling out Fred Matthaei in particular, the editorial continued, “His enthusiasm will not pass unnoticed by his fellow citizens. It is men of Mr. Matthaei’s type, willing to devote their splendid energies to worthwhile civic undertakings, who make a city great.”<sup>61</sup> Matthaei and the DOC had failed for twelve years to bring the Olympics to Detroit, but Detroiters recognized the effort put forth and considered that persistence as representative of the spirit of the city.

After the disappointment of the 1956 Olympics vote, stadium construction plans continued in Detroit. But new developments in the city threatened funding for the

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<sup>58</sup> “Cash Does All Talking in Olympic Bidding -- Matthaei,” *Detroit Free Press*, 2 May 1949.

<sup>59</sup> “Matthaei Still Fighting,” *Detroit Free Press*, 29 Apr 1949.

<sup>60</sup> “As We See It,” *Detroit Free Press*, 30 Apr 1949.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Olympic stadium. In 1954, planning began in earnest for a new convention hall and civic center along the downtown riverfront. The structure was expected to cost \$22.5 million dollars, for which more than half would be paid by the city.<sup>62</sup> One of the main reasons the convention hall gathered such broad public support was that it would ostensibly attract major conventions, exhibitions, and events which would bring national attention and prestige to Detroit. Ironically, this was a central argument stadium planners made in their calls for an Olympic stadium, and the city dollars being devoted to the convention center diminished the possibility of having the city pay for a portion of the stadium.

Also in its early stages during this same period was a proposed redevelopment plan for the Gratiot-Orleans area near the city's Eastern Market and Lafayette Park neighborhoods on the near east side. The Citizens Redevelopment Committee (CRC), a twelve-member committee appointed by the mayor and the president of the Common Council, estimated that the 4,500 residential units would be built across 120 acres at a cost of around fifty million dollars.<sup>63</sup> The project would also include a shopping district, churches, schools, and recreation facilities. Mayor Albert Cobo and the CRC hoped the Gratiot project would serve as a model community and a residential buffer between the downtown business district and blighted neighborhoods.

The Gratiot Plan was one component of a broader Master Plan for downtown in 1955. City planners applied for federal urban renewal grants to tear down slums and blighted buildings in Detroit's Skid Row section north of downtown and the Corktown

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<sup>62</sup> "Exhibit Hall Project Dwarfs Other Plans," *Detroit Free Press*, 26 Mar 1954; "Civic Center is a Fact and No Longer a Dream," *Detroit Free Press*, 26 Mar 1954.

<sup>63</sup> "Gratiot Plan Backers Find Hope in D.C.," *Detroit Free Press*, 6 Jan 1955.

industrial neighborhood to the northwest.<sup>64</sup> More than one hundred million dollars were allocated toward these downtown improvement projects and similar endeavors. The Olympic stadium had broad support among city leaders and the electorate, but it was just one of many civic improvement plans intended to bring prestige and admiration to the Motor City.

But Matthaëi and the DOC believed they had a solid financial plan in place for the civic stadium and the rest of their Olympic strategy. They began preparations for the 1955 IOC meetings to determine which city would host the 1960 Summer Games. Detroit's Olympic organizers were realistic but hopeful in the months leading up to the vote. They understood that they had little chance in gaining enough votes from the IOC because of the "two out of three" rule in determining Olympic host cities.<sup>65</sup> The 1956 games were set to take place in Melbourne, meaning the next two (1960 and 1964) must go to European cities, according to the unwritten rule. Some DOC organizers were optimistic in their public statements regarding the upcoming vote. Douglas Roby observed problems between the IOC and Melbourne for the 1956 Games.<sup>66</sup> Roby noted that if the Games were taken away from Melbourne, they would probably go to Europe,

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<sup>64</sup> "A Picture of Plans for Progress: How City Will Give Downtown Sector an Overhaul," *Detroit Free Press*, 10 Jan 1955.

<sup>65</sup> "City's Olympic Bid Tied to Aussies," *Detroit Free Press*, 11 Jun 1955.

<sup>66</sup> Australian officials demanded that all horses coming into the country for equestrian events be quarantined for two months first. They also imposed customs fees on rifles for the sharpshooting events and increased the daily fees for athletes' room and board. Some IOC officials wanted to either stage some events in Helsinki or move the Games entirely, likely to Rome.; "If Aussies Lose '56 Bid, Roby Optimistic Detroit Will Get '60 Games," *Detroit Free Press*, 12 Jun 1955.



improving Detroit's chances of winning the 1960 Games.<sup>67</sup> Also, many of the younger IOC voters expressed their indifference toward the "two out of three" rule, believing it was an outdated way of thinking in a new era of internationalism.<sup>68</sup> Such statements by IOC voters gave Detroit organizers hope that they had a chance of winning the Games in 1960. But Jack Tompkins, another DOC official, remained skeptical that the European majority on the IOC would vote to hold the Olympics outside Europe.<sup>69</sup> In 1955, Europe was in the middle of a sustained period of economic growth following World War II, and Tompkins feared that the economic climate in Europe would discourage IOC officials from sending the Games elsewhere.

Tompkins's instincts proved correct. In June 1955, the IOC chose Rome as host of the 1960 Summer Olympics.<sup>70</sup> Rome had two specific advantages over Detroit which contributed to the city's victory. First, many IOC voters still subscribed to the idea that European cities should host a majority of Olympic contests. Second, Rome had an existing Olympic stadium. The only facility Rome lacked by the time the IOC voted in 1955 was a smaller, closed-roof stadium for basketball, boxing, and other indoor competitions.<sup>71</sup> Its main Olympic stadium opened in 1953 and could accommodate more than 100,000 spectators. Before the 1955 IOC meetings, the stadium had already demonstrated its ability to host major international events, serving as the host site for a

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<sup>67</sup> "If Aussies Lose '56 Bid, Roby Optimistic Detroit Will Get '60 Games," *Detroit Free Press*, 12 Jun 1955.

<sup>68</sup> "City's Olympic Bid Tied to Aussies," *Detroit Free Press*, 11 Jun 1955.

<sup>69</sup> "Roby Optimistic Detroit Will Get '60 Games," *Detroit Free Press*, 12 Jun 1955.

<sup>70</sup> "Rome is Selected for 1960 Olympics," *New York Times*, 17 Jun 1955.

<sup>71</sup> "Rome is Selected for 1960 Olympics," *New York Times*, 17 Jun 1955.

soccer match between Italy and Hungary.<sup>72</sup> Detroit still had no Olympic stadium or even finalized plans for the construction of one, leaving some IOC officials to wonder if the city could agree on a stadium plan and finish construction by the start of the 1960 Olympics.

Rome's bid also benefited from a strategic error on the part of the IOC. In a moment of desperation leading up to the final vote, Fred Matthaei announced that all transportation fees for athletes would be paid in full if the Olympics went to Detroit. The two million dollar subsidy, Matthaei claimed, would come from television rights fees. Matthaei's decision was based upon the dubious circumstances surrounding Melbourne's winning bid for the 1956 Games, but many IOC members expressed their apprehension toward Matthaei's proposal. They feared that accepting such a proposal might lead to the gradual commercialization of the Olympics.<sup>73</sup>

Detroiters were certainly disappointed at the results of the IOC voting. Most organizers and residents, however, acknowledged they had little chance to win the 1960 Games anyway. Instead, they turned their attention to 1964. More than twenty years after the formation of the Detroit Olympic Committee, organizers felt they had their best chance to submit a winning bid. Other cities which previously asserted their priority over Detroit hosted the Games in recent years (London, 1948; Helsinki, 1952). The 1960 Games were to be held in Europe, increasing the likelihood that the next Olympiad could be given to a non-European city. And in the eyes of some IOC members, Detroit had

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<sup>72</sup> "Rome's Olympic Plant May Be Grandest Ever," *The Amateur Athlete*, December 1957.

<sup>73</sup> "No Lack of Effort Lost Us the Olympics," *Detroit Free Press*, 17 Jun 1955; "Rome is Selected for 1960 Olympics," *New York Times*, 17 Jun 1955.

paid its dues. Melbourne and Rome had not spent nearly the amount of time the DOC had in preparing for an Olympic bid but, for various reasons, gained the necessary votes from the IOC.

### **Obstacles to Stadium Construction**

In Fred Matthaei's estimation, the best way for Detroit to bolster its chances for a 1964 bid was to finance and build an Olympic stadium which DOC officials could emphasize at the 1959 IOC meetings. He expressed his concerns to Detroit Mayor Louis Miriani in April 1958 that IOC officials might vote against Detroit again if no progress was made on the construction of a stadium. He assured Miriani that Detroit "has an excellent chance of staging the 1964 Olympiad," but he warned, "Clouding this picture is the IOC's sensitivity to a lack of facilities on the part of candidate cities....It is becoming increasingly evident that the award of the next Olympiad will be based most definitely on the availability of suitable facilities."<sup>74</sup> Frank Picard, one of the most outspoken members of the DOC, also pressed Miriani to help speed up the process of building a civic stadium. Picard favored the Fairgrounds site and asserted that Detroit could get the Olympics if a detailed stadium plan were in place.<sup>75</sup>

Miriani, however, could not unilaterally approve the financing and construction of a municipal stadium. He needed the support of the Detroit Common Council and the Michigan state legislature. On May 21, 1958, the Common Council passed an ordinance creating an Olympic Games Authority which had the power "to conduct or to have general supervision of the planning, construction and operation, subject to approval of

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<sup>74</sup> Letter from Fred Matthaei to Mayor Louis Miriani, April 1958, DOC collection, Box 12 Folder 5.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Frank Picard to Mayor Louis Miriani, 1 May 1958, DOC collection, Box 12 Folder 1.

Common Council, of any stadium or other athletic facility constructed for the staging of Olympic Games.”<sup>76</sup> The Authority, consisting of a group of automotive and banking executives, had no official budget but was given the power to issue revenue bonds to fund Olympic construction projects.<sup>77</sup>

But Matthaei, the DOC, and the Olympic Games Authority needed the support of the state legislature if they wanted to build on the State Fairgrounds site. In the late 1950s, the state faced a financial crisis, and the legislature was unlikely to approve funding for unnecessary projects. Revenues to the state government were on the decline since the passage of a constitutional amendment in 1946 that diverted two-thirds of sales tax revenues to local school districts.<sup>78</sup> This development, coupled with the constitution’s restriction on the amount of state government debt, prevented politicians in Lansing from giving any public funds to the civic stadium project. By the late 1950s, Michigan also suffered from changes within the automobile industry. Automation of the manufacturing process and technological innovations led to rising unemployment levels throughout the state. Defense contracts that previously had gone to Michigan manufacturers were now going to newly industrial areas of the Sun Belt, and decentralization of the auto industry led to the exodus of assembly plants to other states, bringing Michigan’s percentage of

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<sup>76</sup> Ordinance No. 293-F, Chapter 60, Thomas D. Leadbetter, City Clerk, City of Detroit, 21 May 1958, DOC collection, Box 12 Folder 5.

<sup>77</sup> “City Starts Drive for Olympic Games,” *Detroit Free Press*, 15 July 1958.

<sup>78</sup> Willis F. Dunbar and George S. May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 551-2.

national automotive employment down to forty-seven percent, down from more than sixty percent just twenty years before.<sup>79</sup>

Even within this fiscal crisis, though, some legislators tried to build support for state funding of an Olympic stadium. Matthaei and the DOC hoped the state would lend its credit to the issuance of revenue bonds to cover construction and operations costs. In 1958, state senator and future governor John Swainson introduced a bill to establish a State Olympic Stadium Authority. The authority would have been given the power to organize financing and construction of an Olympic stadium, including the issuance of revenue bonds and the creation of a lease agreement with the state.<sup>80</sup> DOC members understood the volatile political climate in which they were pursuing stadium funding. One member understood that “there may be opposition from people who will argue that the Olympic Games are but ‘a fourteen-day track event’ and that, in this era of acute public need for additional facilities and other public necessities, to earmark state revenues for a ‘white elephant’ stadium is unwise.”<sup>81</sup> Legislators agreed, and the bill never made it to the floor for a vote, dying in the Finance Committee.<sup>82</sup>

The political and economic situation in Michigan forced Olympic organizers to prepare their presentation for the 1964 Games without firm plans for an Olympic stadium. They hoped that the strength of the rest of Detroit’s proposal would win over enough IOC delegates. Some DOC members wanted to avoid the stadium discussion

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<sup>79</sup> Dunbar and May, *Michigan*, 552-3.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from John Swainson, State Senator (D), to Fred Matthaei, 8 September 1958, DOC collection, Box 12 Folder 4.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Richard Cross to Fred Matthaei, 28 October 1958, DOC collection, Box 12 Folder 3.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from John Swainson to Fred Matthaei, 8 September 1958, DOC collection, Box 12 Folder 4.

altogether, thinking any public debates over stadium funding and construction would emphasize Michigan's economic problems and hurt Detroit's chances of winning over the IOC. In January 1959, DOC member and automobile industry executive Richard Cross privately admitted he was "in fear and dread of not only the foreign press, but some of the press in this country picking up the matter and challenging us on the all-important point that we have only a paper stadium and no real assurances of how it can be made concrete."<sup>83</sup> The Olympic stadium was the centerpiece to a city's Olympic bid, and Detroit's Olympic organizers had no choice but to highlight the rest of its proposal and hope IOC voters could overlook the Motor City's "paper stadium" when deciding on the 1964 host city.

### **1964 Games: Another Bid, Another Disappointment**

As the IOC meetings approached in May 1959, Detroit's Olympic representatives prepared yet another presentation they hoped would convince enough IOC voters to send the Games to Detroit in 1964. Matthaei and his colleagues believed Detroit would finally emerge victorious from the IOC meetings. Much of this optimism originated from an unlikely source. Soviet delegates to the IOC stated their support for Detroit's bid and confirmed their intention to vote for the Motor City for the 1964 Olympics. This surprising development occurred not through any improvements in Cold War relations but because of a propaganda opportunity for the Soviets. Russian Olympic officials wanted to demonstrate the superiority of their athletes in full view of an American

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<sup>83</sup> Letter from Richard Cross to Norman Warren, American Metal Products Company, 22 January 1959, DOC collection, Box 13 Folder 1.

audience.<sup>84</sup> Soviet support, along with the goodwill the DOC built with the IOC over two decades, gave Detroit a distinct advantage in its quest for the Olympic Games.

Detroit's main competition for the 1964 bid was Tokyo. The Japanese city backed out of hosting the 1940 Olympics because of its war with China, and the Games were eventually cancelled when World War II began. Some IOC members felt Tokyo deserved the 1964 Games because the city never had a chance to host in 1940, but others refused to give Tokyo any preferential treatment because of Japan's aggression throughout the 1930s and during World War II.<sup>85</sup> Tokyo, however, had a completed Olympic stadium which its representatives could highlight in their IOC presentation. Matthaei could only discuss Detroit's plans, proposals, and intentions.

As was becoming somewhat of a broken record to Matthaei and the DOC by this point, the IOC voted to hold the Summer Olympics somewhere other than Detroit. Tokyo received thirty-four votes compared to just nine for Detroit, an overwhelming defeat for the Motor City.<sup>86</sup> Detroit's lack of progress in building an Olympic stadium certainly influenced some voters. Some reports in the immediate aftermath of the voting claimed that voters preferred Tokyo's "concrete and steel" stadium over Detroit's "paper" stadium.<sup>87</sup> But other factors may have contributed to Tokyo's victory as well. A *Detroit Times* editorial accused IOC president Avery Brundage and U.S. Olympic delegate John Garland, of Los Angeles, of actively working against Detroit's cause. The

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<sup>84</sup> "Russia to Aid Detroit Bid for '64 Olympics," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 May 1959.

<sup>85</sup> "Russia to Aid Detroit Bid for '64 Olympics," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 May 1959; "Why Detroit Lost," *Detroit Times*, 27 May 1959.

<sup>86</sup> "No Hope Till '72," *Detroit Free Press*, 27 May 1959.

<sup>87</sup> "Detroit's Hard Fighter for the Lost Olympics," *Detroit Free Press*, 27 May 1959.

editorial claimed that Brundage favored Tokyo because of the cancellation of the 1940 Games, and accused Garland of having a “dog-in-the-manger attitude” that was “revolting of all sportsmen,” amid rumors that he sabotaged Detroit’s bid to improve the odds that Los Angeles could host the Summer Olympics in 1968.<sup>88</sup> Detroiters searched for any possible explanation for the DOC’s inability to persuade IOC officials, but the stadium issue loomed large over any discussion of Detroit’s Olympic failures.

Early discussions of Olympic stadium locations in the late 1930s and early 1940s centered around the costs for each site, the number of families which might be displaced, and the suitability of a large athletic facility within particular neighborhoods of the city. But by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the stadium location debate was mostly decided. A small contingent wanted to build the facility downtown along the city’s riverfront, but most organizers felt that the Fairgrounds site was the optimal location for an Olympic stadium. Those who favored a downtown stadium believed the Olympic venue could bring international attention to downtown during the Games and would serve as a centerpiece for downtown redevelopment in the ensuing years. Calls for a downtown stadium would grow by the late 1960s as the stadium project shifted from an Olympic facility to a civic stadium geared toward professional sporting events. But for the time being, the consensus among stadium planners was focused on the Fairgrounds site.

Matthaei and the Detroit Olympic Committee struggled to maintain financial support for a new stadium from local and state politicians throughout the 1940s and 1950s. The stagnant economic climate in Michigan prevented many state legislators

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<sup>88</sup> If Detroit hosted the 1964 Games, it would be several years, perhaps a few decades, before any other American city would have an opportunity.; “Why Detroit Lost,” *Detroit Times*, 27 May 1959.



from giving their support to the Olympic stadium project, especially during the late 1950s. But politicians and economists viewed civic stadiums differently by the 1960s. Many policy makers gradually came to believe that the economic and tangential benefits of building a municipal sport facility outweighed the costs. Also, as one city after another spent public dollars on new, municipal stadiums, civic leaders throughout the country sought approval from their constituents to build their own modern stadiums in order to avoid having their city labeled as outdated or old-fashioned. It was within this economic, social, and cultural climate that the Olympic/civic stadium project seemed most likely to finally become a reality.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “THIS IS THE ERA OF THE ‘HAVE-NOTS’”: OLYMPIC BIDS AND STADIUM PLANNING IN THE 1960S

More than twenty years after the Detroit Olympic Committee made its first bid to bring the Summer Olympics to Detroit, the plan to build an Olympic stadium gained steam in the early 1960s. This growing interest in building a multi-purpose stadium occurred for a variety of complex reasons. Many Detroiters favored the construction of a civic stadium as the centerpiece of Detroit’s bid to host the Summer Olympics. Local politicians and DOC organizers felt the construction of a stadium was necessary if they were to expect the International Olympic Committee to vote for Detroit as a Summer Games host.

But the reasons behind growing support for a civic stadium in Detroit were far more complicated than just bringing the Olympics to the Motor City. The push for a multi-purpose facility continued even after Detroit’s Olympic hopes faded. Some explanations, such as the deteriorating condition of the State Fairgrounds and the desire to build a new home for the Tigers and Lions, were particular to Detroit and the metropolitan area and depended on the individual decisions of such men as Governors John Swainson and George Romney, Lions owner William Clay Ford, and Tigers owner John Fetzer. Civic pride was also a key component of support for building the facility, as Detroiters and area residents believed a new stadium could affirm Detroit’s cultural importance in the region and confirm Detroit’s status as a great American city.

Some sociological studies have found that stadium boosters in other cities have used the “civic pride” argument to gain support because of the difficulty in accurately quantifying how much civic pride a stadium actually brings to a city.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have emphasized the importance of culture and “cultural symbols” such as sports stadiums as contributors to civic support for public funding, particularly in the era of deindustrialization and suburbanization.<sup>2</sup> In 1984, after the Baltimore Colts packed up in the middle of the night and moved to Indiana, Indianapolis mayor William Hudnut III exclaimed that bringing an NFL team to the city was “a boost to the city’s image nationally and to local morale as a symbol of major league status.”<sup>3</sup> These factors were in play in Detroit as civic boosters and the local press stressed that a new stadium, particularly a downtown stadium, could be a “welcome morale booster” for Detroiters and would “symbolize the progressive, dynamic character” of metropolitan Detroit.<sup>4</sup> These boosters also claimed that a new stadium could spur economic development in the surrounding area and throughout the city, although subsequent scholars have thoroughly debunked that argument over the past few decades.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin J. Delaney and Rick Eckstein, *Public Dollars, Private Stadiums: The Battle Over Building Sports Stadiums* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Michael Danielson, *Home Team: Professional Sports and the American Metropolis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Costas Spirou and Larry Bennett, *It's Hardly Sportin': Stadiums, Neighborhoods, and the New Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, ““The Colts' Move: For Indianapolis it's a Boon” *New York Times*, 8 Apr 1984.

<sup>4</sup> News Release, from Richard W. Zemmin, Michigan Consolidated Gas Company, 13 July 1967, Box 457 Folder 13, Jerome Cavanagh Collection; “Boost for a Downtown Stadium,” *Detroit News*, 10 Nov 1969.

<sup>5</sup> See Mark S. Rosentraub, *Major League Losers: The Real Cost of Sports and Who's Paying for It* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Andrew S. Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win: Baseball Economics and Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); James T. Bennett, *They Play, You Pay: Why*

Other factors, though, included economic and cultural changes on local and national levels which influenced the outcome of the civic stadium plan in Detroit. These structural transformations included the growth of the federal highway system, New Deal programs guaranteeing federal funds to civic projects, a booming national economy, increased leisure time for middle-class Americans, and the growth of mass spectator sport as a major component of American culture. Business leaders, economists, and urban planners throughout the country claimed municipal stadiums could generate major economic benefits to cities and metropolitan areas, particularly the potential for using the stadium as the central hub of an entertainment and shopping district. All of these reasons led Detroit leaders and citizens to step up their efforts to make the Olympic stadium a reality.

But as political, economic, cultural, and civic interests converged to push stadium plans forward, opposing interests stalled those plans throughout the 1960s and eventually destroyed Detroit's chances of winning an Olympic bid and building a modern, multi-purpose stadium. Local politicians such as Mayor Jerome Cavanagh, Michigan Governor George Romney, and members of the Detroit Common Council and Michigan State Legislature could not agree on the type of stadium to be built or the future site of the stadium itself. These opposing visions, along with resistance among some Detroiters to the use of public funds for a sport facility, contributed to Detroit's failure to build an Olympic/civic stadium during the 1960s, despite broad public approval for the project.

## **Olympic Bids in an Era of Protest**

Perhaps the most obvious reason Detroiters supported the construction of a new civic stadium was to convince the International Olympic Committee to stage the Summer Olympics in Detroit. The Detroit Olympic Committee had been working to bring the Games to the Motor City since the late 1930s, and the resolve of Frederick Matthaei and the rest of the DOC strengthened over the course of several failed bids throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Most Olympics supporters agreed that a new stadium was necessary if Detroit were to host the Games, but they disagreed over when such a facility should be built. Frank A. Picard, a prominent judge for the U.S. District Court in Michigan and a member of the Detroit Olympic Committee, felt that the DOC's past failures could be attributed to the lack of a completed Olympic stadium. In December 1961, Picard argued that the Olympic stadium needed to be built before Detroit could expect the IOC to guarantee the Games to Detroit. He claimed that "we wouldn't get to first base" in the city's Olympic bid without being able to show a finished stadium to the IOC.<sup>6</sup> But according to his estimation, he was "the only one on the Olympic Committee who objected to the idea of the Olympic Games without a stadium."<sup>7</sup> Other members of the DOC believed they needed only the plans and design for a new stadium in order to sway the IOC. The actual construction, they thought, could come at a later date, following the acceptance of Detroit's bid.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Frank A. Picard, U.S. District Court Judge and Olympic Committee member, to Walter Goodman, Michigan State Fair, 9 Dec 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

In the months leading up to the IOC meetings in 1963, Detroit Olympic officials, city and state leaders, even national political figures, emphasized Detroit's Olympic spirit and the unity the Olympics could bring to the city. Vice President Lyndon Johnson, talking with Mayor Cavanagh, described the city's attempt to bring the Olympics to the United States as "a very highly important endeavor."<sup>8</sup> Johnson celebrated the unifying spirit the Olympic efforts were creating in Detroit and throughout the region. Dr. Harold T. Frierhood, member of the USOC, noted "the spirit of enthusiasm and co-operation" being exhibited in Detroit. Such cooperation, Frierhood argued, "gave [the USOC] the idea that the Olympic ideal would be properly interpreted in Detroit."<sup>9</sup> These types of public statements about the DOC's organizing efforts and Detroiters' support for the Games portrayed the city as being fully united behind the Olympic bid and the stadium plans.

But the mood within the city was far more complex. Detroit suffered from rising unemployment, housing problems, and tense race relations in the early 1960s.<sup>10</sup> Many Detroiters believed the city needed to address these problems rather than focus so much attention and money on hosting the Olympics. In a letter to the *Free Press* editor, one reader chided city and state leaders for their misplaced priorities. She wondered why the state was ready to spend so much money on an Olympic stadium when "we have a

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<sup>8</sup> "Vice President on the Line to Give Olympic Bid a Boost," *Detroit News*, 5 Oct 1963.

<sup>9</sup> "Olympic Presentation Praised, Enthusiasm Boosts City," *Detroit Free Press*, 26 Mar 1963.

<sup>10</sup> See Darden, et al, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*; Fine, *Violence in the Model City*; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

greater need for hospitals and homes for our children who are mentally ill.”<sup>11</sup> Another reader suggested that the decision to spend public funds on a stadium be put to a vote because of the great expense of the project and “with money being a scarce commodity” in Michigan at that time.<sup>12</sup> These types of assertions reveal dissension among some Detroiters on the Olympic agenda and the economic benefits an Olympic stadium might bring to the city.

The most organized form of protest against the Olympics came from supporters of an open occupancy law in the city. Detroit’s organized open housing movement began in the late 1940s and became a major political force throughout the 1950s. The Coordinating Council on Human Relations (CCHR), founded in 1947, brought civil rights organizations and religious groups together to end housing segregation in Detroit. The CCHR tried to impress upon whites that the reason property values dropped when blacks moved into a neighborhood was because white residents panicked and fled rather than maintain stability in the neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> When appealing to white residents failed, civil rights groups pushed lawmakers to pass legislation guaranteeing equal housing opportunities for blacks. The Detroit Common Council and the Michigan legislature, though, tried to skirt the issue during the late 1950s, listening to the demands of

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<sup>11</sup> “As Our Readers See It: Voters Should Decide on Olympics Spending,” *Detroit Free Press*, 30 March 1963.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 191.

protestors but taking little action to fix the problem.<sup>14</sup> Despite these obstacles, civil rights groups refused to back down in their demands for open occupancy laws in Detroit.

As the Olympic drive in Detroit gained more attention from the mainstream press, civil rights activists decided to use the Olympic movement to publicize the city's continuing problems with housing segregation and racial discrimination. In early 1963, just a few months before the USOC would vote on which city should represent the United States at the IOC meetings in October, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) asked all citizens to refuse to sign a petition supporting the Olympic movement until the Common Council passed an open occupancy ordinance guaranteeing blacks the right to live in any area of the city. CORE's official statement asked, "If Detroit does not pass an open occupancy ordinance, how will the [International] Olympic Committee understand that Detroit is not of the same tradition as the Birminghams of our nation?"<sup>15</sup> CORE was pointing out the contradiction between Olympic ideals of equality and such overt forms of racial discrimination throughout Detroit. Its primary strategy in publicly comparing the Motor City to Birmingham—a city with a shameful racist history that had gained recent international attention for its violent resistance to desegregation—was to use the national publicity of Detroit's Olympic quest to speed up the process of housing desegregation and equal opportunity.

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<sup>14</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 193.

<sup>15</sup> Birmingham, Alabama, was a central arena of the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Activists brought international attention to their cause in 1963 as Police Chief Bull Connor turned fire hoses on black children protesting on Birmingham's streets. Statement from Congress of Racial Equality, 1963, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Reuther Library, Box 103 Folder 12.



Protests calling for open occupancy legislation continued throughout 1963, especially as the upcoming IOC meetings placed Detroit in the national spotlight. On October 11, 1963, just two days before the Detroit Olympic Committee flew to Baden-Baden, Germany, to state their case to the IOC, about fifty demonstrators interrupted an Olympic Torch relay ceremony outside the City-County building. As each Detroit Common Council member was announced during the ceremony, the protestors—equal numbers of whites and blacks—booed those members who voted against an open occupancy ordinance a week prior.<sup>16</sup> Frustration among civil rights proponents led demonstrators to use somewhat abrasive tactics such as this to publicize their message. One protestor, an Army veteran, explained his decision to participate in the protest:

People have become so excited about the honor and the millions of dollars Detroit would receive from having the Olympics here, that they have forgotten that there are large segments of our population that do not enjoy full equality of opportunity in jobs, education, or in housing... For how much money are we to accept in order to forget about the Negro and White Americans who died fighting racists during World War II; how much money are we to accept to forget about the White and Negro Americans who died fighting for freedom in Korea; will the sum of money ever equal the tears shed by their mothers?<sup>17</sup>

Mayor Cavanagh was also jeered at the event even though he supported passage of the ordinance. Although Cavanagh seemed to favor open occupancy throughout the city, it was up to the Common Council to approve any ordinances to that effect. The protest was non-violent, and there was no police intervention, but the demonstrators were able to shift the focus of the upcoming Olympic vote to Detroit's legacy of housing discrimination.

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<sup>16</sup> "Mayor Blasts Booing Pickets," *Detroit Free Press*, 12 Oct 1963.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from David Feinberg, to Mayor Cavanagh, 12 Oct 1963, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 104 Folder 17.

If the protestors hoped to gain public support from Cavanagh for their actions at the torch ceremony, however, they came away disappointed. Cavanagh scolded the demonstrators for their “rowdy and disgraceful exhibition” and claimed, “Today’s small but frantic group by no means represents the thinking or attitudes of the citizens they presumed to represent.”<sup>18</sup> Cavanagh understood the entire country was watching and he needed to assert his control over the situation, lest Detroit enhance its reputation as a city in which law and order are being cast aside in favor of protest, disobedience, and crime. He argued that he was not alone in his disgust toward the protestors, some of whom booed and jeered during the playing of the national anthem. Arthur Johnson, executive secretary of the local NAACP chapter, agreed with Cavanagh that disrupting the anthem was out of line, but he admitted that several NAACP members participated in the protest.<sup>19</sup> How many protestors actually made noise during the national anthem is unclear, but the incident brought national attention to Detroit’s continuing problems in housing discrimination.

Two days later, the Detroit Olympic Committee presented its proposal to the International Olympic Committee for the 1968 Summer Games. The DOC was competing against bids from Lyon, Buenos Aires, and its strongest opponent, Mexico City. Fred Matthaei and his colleagues had been working for a Detroit Olympics since 1936, and Matthaei felt this was Detroit’s last real opportunity to host an Olympiad. He told a member of the Russian Olympic delegation, “If we don’t get it now, I don’t think

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<sup>18</sup> “Mayor Blasts Booing Pickets,” *Detroit Free Press*, 12 Oct 1963.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

we would ever have another chance. It would be useless to continue the fight.”<sup>20</sup> Lyall Smith of the *Detroit Free Press* posited a few important reasons for Matthaei’s “now or never” attitude. First, Olympic boosters had conducted several fund-raising drives among corporations, individuals, and unions, and Matthaei realized that he could not continue drawing from the same well every four years. Second, and perhaps more important, if the 1968 Games went to Mexico City, they would most likely return to Europe for 1972, leaving Matthaei and the DOC to look ahead to 1976 as the next possibility for a Detroit Olympics.<sup>21</sup> Matthaei may have exaggerated his desperation in order to gain support from the Eastern bloc, but he certainly recognized the possibility that the Olympic dream may never happen in Detroit after nearly three decades of rejection from the IOC.

Matthaei’s pessimism ended up being prophetic. On October 18, the IOC voted to hold the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Douglas Roby, IOC voter and a former Detroit Olympic Committee member, expressed his surprise and disappointment at the voting results but speculated that Detroit’s loss had little to do with the quality of the city’s proposal. Roby believed that many IOC members simply did not want the United States to host the Olympics because the country “has everything. We are a ‘have’ nation. This is the era of the ‘have-nots.’”<sup>22</sup> Public consciousness of poverty, racial inequality, and underdevelopment grew throughout the decade. From Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty to the various civil rights protests and labor struggles that

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<sup>20</sup> “Detroit Hopes Sag in Olympic Race,” *Detroit Free Press*, 17 Oct 1963.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Olympic Loss Laid to Anti-U.S. Bias,” *Detroit Free Press*, 19 Oct 1963.

gained international attention, the IOC was making decisions within these social and political paradigm shifts. In Roby's estimation, had the Detroit Olympic Committee's plan for the Olympic stadium and secondary facilities been even more extravagant and impressive, it could have turned off even greater numbers of IOC voters.

Fair housing activists in Detroit also may have had an effect on the IOC delegates' decision to award the Olympics to Mexico City. A group of activists sent letters to IOC members to voice their anger and frustration, requesting that they vote against Detroit's bid because of the Common Council's refusal to approve an open occupancy ordinance to end housing discrimination. One letter, written by a member of the Detroit NAACP's housing committee, implored, "The Olympic Games represent fair play...fair play has not become a living part of Detroit and America." The letter continued, "This country (America) is not capable of accepting the many colored people from all parts of the world because it has not settled the difference toward the Negro."<sup>23</sup> The *Free Press* doubted that the letters had any influence on the IOC's decision since no IOC members questioned the Detroit delegation on the issue during its presentation.<sup>24</sup>

### **Stadium Funding and Its Challenges**

Despite its Olympic defeat, Detroit city leaders continued with their efforts to plan and construct a civic stadium. But support for the construction of a civic stadium certainly was not unanimous, as the torch ceremony protestors clearly demonstrated. Some objected to the overall plan on the grounds that public dollars should be spent on

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<sup>23</sup> "Romney Consoles Crowd at Airport," *Detroit Free Press*, 20 Oct 1963.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

necessary services such as hospitals, schools, and roads, not a multi-purpose stadium for the benefit of wealthy team owners. Throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s, Detroit faced rising unemployment resulting from deindustrialization, suburbanization, and racial discrimination. The city lost around 134,000 manufacturing jobs between 1947 and 1963.<sup>25</sup> This significant shift in the city's economic base led to a greater need for welfare programs and diminished the city's tax base. Stadium supporters were pushing for millions of public dollars to be spent at a time when companies and jobs were leaving the city on a regular basis.

As Detroit's economic problems became more glaring to many of the city's residents by the 1960s, some Detroiters wondered why the public should fund the construction of a new stadium if its primary beneficiaries would be Tigers owner John Fetzer and Lions owner William Clay Ford, whose teams would likely be the primary tenants of a new civic stadium. Public funding of sport stadiums was a relatively new phenomenon in 1960. Cleveland Municipal Stadium (1931) and Milwaukee County Stadium (1953) were the only two major league facilities built largely with public dollars to that point. One expert in stadium financing blamed this change on the increased cost of construction over the course of a few decades, leading team owners to seek public financial support, as well as the increase in leisure time and disposable income among many ordinary citizens.<sup>26</sup> In the 1960s, urban residents were far more likely to approve

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<sup>25</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 126.

<sup>26</sup> "Financing Stadiums and Coliseums," E. Carlton Heeseler, Kidder, Peabody, & Co. Inc., date unknown, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 9.

public funding of stadiums because they would be more likely to use the facilities than they may have been in the prewar years.

But not all citizens in Detroit had increased leisure time and disposable income. African-Americans bore the brunt of unemployment, deindustrialization, poor housing, and racial discrimination. Thomas Sugrue argues that continued discrimination against black Detroiters throughout the 1940s and 1950s coupled with the decline of the automobile industry led to “a seemingly permanent class of underemployed and jobless blacks” by the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> During this period, whites often commented that blacks lacked the necessary skills for many industry jobs. But the reasons behind that lack of skills often stemmed from racial discrimination which limited black access to education and confined them to entry-level and unskilled labor. When the job market shrank, entry-level jobs were often the first to disappear, disproportionately affecting black workers.<sup>28</sup> Because of higher rates of unemployment than whites and confinement to low-wage jobs, blacks were less likely to have extra money to attend sporting events and were less likely to support the use of public dollars for stadium construction.

The stadium plan also found opposition from some local clergy and church organizations. Since the 1940s, the Detroit Olympic Committee, and various mayors and civic leaders favored raising taxes on horse racing throughout the state to fund some of the construction costs. Such a plan would help the state legislature avoid raising income taxes or drawing funds from some other sources to pay for the stadium project. Planners

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<sup>27</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 146.

estimated the increased pari-mutuel tax would bring in an additional \$1.6 million in annual revenue to put toward retiring the stadium revenue bonds.<sup>29</sup> But some local religious groups argued that the state should dissociate the project from horse racing, with its attendant gambling. *The Michigan Christian Advocate*, the official journal of Michigan Methodists, stood firmly against the use of horse racing funds for the stadium or any other Olympic projects. An editorial in the journal argued that “if there isn’t enough money coming from legitimate sources to finance the games, then let them go to some other city that can finance them by less objectionable methods.”<sup>30</sup> The Michigan Council of Churches, an influential religious organization, agreed, claiming that the Olympic stadium was not worth building if it meant associating the Olympics with something as depraved and corrupt as gambling.<sup>31</sup> The council’s stance presented Cavanagh and stadium supporters with another obstacle to overcome. Either another avenue of funding could be pursued or the stadium plans could press forward despite vocal objections from a sizeable portion of the local electorate.

But the idea to tax horse racing garnered support from citizens who preferred such a plan over using money from the state’s general fund. Stadium supporters pointed to the fact that nearly all state funds in the proposed stadium plans would come from additional taxes on horse racing. In March 1963, Michigan State Fair general manager Walter Goodman announced the passage of a bill to increase the tax on pari-mutuel betting. He asserted that the resulting increase in revenue “will be appropriated annually to meet the

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<sup>29</sup> “Romney, Cavanagh Unveil Plan,” *Detroit Free Press*, 23 February 1963.

<sup>30</sup> “Olympics Racing Tie Irks Clergy,” *Detroit Free Press*, 6 March 1963.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Fair's lease payments on the proposed stadium."<sup>32</sup> Goodman and many supporters in Lansing claimed that the increased revenues from horse racing would keep the State Fair Authority from having to rely on general funds for the project. But opponents argued that even the additional revenues from horse racing could be used for more important projects, such as the construction of public housing in Detroit to alleviate overcrowding in black neighborhoods.

Some opposition to the public funding of a civic stadium came from within the Fairgrounds' Development Commission itself. Olga Madar, the most vocal opponent of the stadium plan on the Development Commission, stated, "I doubt that a Civic Stadium can be self-supporting....it has always seemed rather curious to me that private enterprise has seemed to be so reluctant to invest in a supposedly profit-making venture unless tax concessions and land gifts are made by the municipality."<sup>33</sup> Recent scholarly research supports Madar's assessment that civic stadiums are unlikely to bring in enough revenue to justify a municipality's investment.<sup>34</sup> But in the early 1960s, widespread funding of civic stadiums was just beginning, and the results of those projects were not yet clearly understood.

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<sup>32</sup> Memorandum from Walter A. Goodman to Michigan State Fair Authority Commissioners, 16 March 1963, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 9.

<sup>33</sup> "A Record of Position Taken Regarding Civic Stadium While Member of State Fairgrounds Development Commission," by Olga M. Madar, member of Fairgrounds Development Commission, 14 March 1962, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 1.

<sup>34</sup> See Michael Danielson, *Home Team: Professional Sports and the American Metropolis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Mark S. Rosentraub, "Stadiums and Urban Space," in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes: The Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Stadiums*, ed. Roger G. Noll and Andrew Zimbalist (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997); Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist, "Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Facilities," in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes*; Andrew Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).



Madar raised an interesting question about why team owners would call upon civic leaders to provide funds for stadium development, but the answer to her question is rather simple. Private enterprises (team owners) realized that city and state governments would meet their demands to keep professional sports in the area. The bigger question is why local governments would spend public dollars to keep a professional sports team in the area when there is no proof that a new stadium will provide a satisfactory return on investment. The answer to that question is far more complicated. Local political interests, a booming national economy, the rise of spectator sports as part of American culture, and the public funding of modern, civic stadiums across the country affected the decisions of Detroit politicians, business leaders, and the Michigan State Fair Authority. Also worth considering is that most politicians feared that losing a sports franchise could mean losing the next election.

Cavanagh was part of a contingent of civic leaders during the 1950s and 1960s who believed that reviving a city's downtown core would bring economic and cultural vitality to the rest of the metropolitan area. Historian Jon Teaford asserts that, for many policymakers and civic leaders in the postwar era, "the desired metropolis of the future had a dominant downtown, an invisible black populace, and a female population dedicated primarily to consumption rather than production."<sup>35</sup> Often, these types of ideas represented backward-looking and reactionary visions of urban America. Rather than reassess theories of urban development in the wake of shifting demographics, new federal

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<sup>35</sup> Jon Teaford, *The Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise of Post-Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 50.

policies encouraging suburbanization and homeownership, and the ubiquity of the automobile in American culture, many urban leaders wanted to simply recreate the urban America which existed earlier in the century. And healthy cities in the early twentieth century boasted thriving downtown business and retail centers.

### **Stadium Construction and Urban Redevelopment**

By the late 1960s, part of Cavanagh's vision for a new Detroit was a modern civic stadium along the downtown riverfront. Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and St. Louis were also developing their own stadium projects during the decade, which they expected to be centerpieces in the overall economic revitalization of their respective cities. Political leaders in all three of these cities were hoping these stadiums would help the transition into a post-industrial era.<sup>36</sup> Charles Farris, executive director of the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority in St. Louis, linked stadium development with the overall health of the downtown area and warned that "we might as well fold up the city" if downtown were allowed to deteriorate.<sup>37</sup>

In Detroit, Cavanagh needed the support of Tigers owner John Fetzer and Lions owner William Clay Ford if such a project was to be realized. Ford repeatedly stated his desire to move his team out of Tiger Stadium, citing a small seating capacity and a stadium design better suited for baseball than football.<sup>38</sup> His support for a new,

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<sup>36</sup> Aaron Cowan, "A Whole New Ball Game: Sports Stadiums and Urban Renewal in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis, 1950-1970," *Ohio Valley History* (Fall 2005), 63-86.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Summary of Activities Planning Committee meeting for the State Fair Grounds Development Commission, 20 Dec 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 2; Letter from Ford to Cavanagh, 30 Nov 1964, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 169 Folder 20.

multi-purpose stadium was well-documented throughout the 1960s, and he had conversations with Cavanagh on the subject, although he preferred a facility designed exclusively for football. John Fetzer, on the other hand, considered Tiger Stadium to be one of the best stadiums in professional baseball and a valuable commodity for his franchise. He admitted that he would listen to proposals to move his team from Tiger Stadium to a new facility, but he showed less urgency to build a civic stadium than Ford.<sup>39</sup>

Several factors, though, conspired to change Fetzer's attitude toward Tiger Stadium during the 1960s. First, Tiger Stadium's last major renovation occurred in 1938, nearly a quarter century ago. As new stadiums were built across the baseball landscape during the 1960s, Fetzer gradually viewed Tiger Stadium as an old-style stadium of a bygone era. Now, city leaders were either building civic stadiums with public dollars or giving team owners major incentives to build. Perhaps the most notable example of this new trend was the construction of Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles. Throughout the 1950s, Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley sought assistance from New York Parks Commissioner Robert Moses and the municipal government to clear land for the construction of a new ballpark to replace aging Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. O'Malley was willing to use private dollars but needed help to acquire enough land for a new facility. Moses refused, and Los Angeles officials offered O'Malley hundreds of acres of

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from John Fetzer to Thomas Lane, Thomas E. Lane Co., 31 Aug 1962, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 1; Letter from John Fetzer to Cavanagh, 12 Jan 1966, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 304 Folder 2.

available land at a rate far below market value to construct a modern stadium.<sup>40</sup> After Dodger Stadium opened in 1962, team owners throughout the American and National leagues realized the bargaining power they held in their battles with municipal leaders. They could threaten to move west or south if cities did not meet their stadium demands.

Dodger Stadium was perhaps the most notable example of diverting public resources toward stadium construction, but public funding of sport stadiums in the United States dates back to the 1930s. The first municipally-funded stadium built primarily for use by a professional sports team was Cleveland Stadium (also known as Cleveland Municipal Stadium), built in 1931 at a cost of \$3 million.<sup>41</sup> Architects designed the stadium as a multi-sport facility. The Cleveland Indians baseball team made it their home during the spring and summer months, although many players complained that the playing field and seating capacity were too large for baseball. Cleveland Stadium also hosted professional football; the Cleveland Rams played in the stadium sporadically from 1936 to 1945, then the Cleveland Browns from 1946 to 1995.<sup>42</sup> Cleveland Stadium represented the dawn of a new era in professional sports in which taxpayers subsidized facilities for privately-owned sports franchises.

Not only did Cleveland Stadium represent a departure from privately-financed facilities, but it also was the first baseball stadium that had ample space. Thus, the stadium's designers could create it in any shape they wished without being forced to

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<sup>40</sup> Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 154, 163.

<sup>41</sup> John Pastier, et al., *Ballparks: Yesterday and Today*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

adapt to street patterns, nearby buildings, mass transit routes, or other urban restrictions.<sup>43</sup> Earlier ballparks such as Boston's Fenway Park, Brooklyn's Ebbets Field, Detroit's Navin Field, and Pittsburgh's Forbes Field had asymmetrical dimensions because they had to be shoehorned amidst existing structures. Some argued that this gave the stadiums character and made them part of the city landscape. Cleveland Stadium, though, was elliptically-shaped, had a symmetrical playing field, and was removed from the rest of the downtown area. Surrounded by Lake Erie on one side and parking lots on the others—cars had grown ubiquitous by the end of the 1920s—Cleveland Stadium became the first example of a publicly-funded arena set apart from its surroundings.

But Cleveland Stadium did not lead to a stadium construction boom during the 1930s. The Great Depression was a major factor in that construction hiatus, but few cities needed new stadiums during this decade anyway because most stadiums were less than thirty years old. In fact, thirty more years passed before a wave of public dollars in cities across the country bankrolled new municipal stadiums. This explosion of publicly-financed stadiums closely followed Major League Baseball's shift westward during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1953, the Boston Braves left their East Coast home of fifty-two years and moved their operations to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Milwaukee citizens approved the use of five million dollars of public funds for stadium construction in 1950, before the Braves had even agreed to move west. Milwaukee city leaders hoped to convince a major league team to move to the area or to persuade baseball executives to approve an expansion team in Milwaukee. Many Milwaukee citizens were willing to use

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<sup>43</sup> Pastier, *Ballparks: Yesterday and Today*, 39.

public funds to bring a major league team into town, and they showed their support throughout the 1950s as the Braves consistently led the National League in attendance.<sup>44</sup> The American and National Leagues demonstrated remarkable stability throughout the first half of the twentieth century. No teams changed cities from 1903 until 1953, when the Braves moved to Milwaukee. Once the Braves moved west into a stadium built with public funds, other teams realized the opportunity for westward expansion.

Several cities funded the construction of municipal, multi-purpose stadiums throughout the 1960s, most of which were designed to host professional baseball and football teams. Part of the explanation for this was the need for politicians and business leaders to create buildings and landmarks to keep up with other urban centers in terms of urban development and economic vitality. Once the first few publicly-funded stadiums went up in Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Houston, city leaders across the country recognized both the symbolic power of sport stadiums and the economic potential of using municipal stadiums as a centerpiece of urban redevelopment.

The importance placed on professional sport stadiums resulted from the monopoly held by professional sports teams. Since there was a strictly limited number of major league sports franchises—limited by the cartels that controlled sport, the National Football League, National Basketball Association, National Hockey League, and Major League Baseball—only their cities would need to design, fund, and construct such massive facilities. Citizens who lived in cities that served as homes to professional teams were often willing to use public funds to build stadiums which would showcase the city

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<sup>44</sup> Pastier, *Ballparks: Yesterday and Today*, 44.

as a major urban center. The fact that a finite number of cities had “major league” status meant distinguishing those cities from smaller markets that were left out of the business of major league sports. Such status created a heightened level of civic pride within these “big league” cities. They were recognized as “modern,” “progressive,” and “cosmopolitan” in the media. Detroit’s mainstream press described a potential new stadium as a “builder of pride” among Motor City residents.<sup>45</sup> It is understandable that city leaders would approve the use of public funds for land clearance and stadium construction, given the limited number of professional franchises available and vocal support from the press.<sup>46</sup>

While it is understandable that civic leaders made such a strong connection between major league sports and their cities’ “major league” status, such thinking was flawed, as many economists have argued. There is little evidence that the decision of businesses to locate or relocate in a particular city has anything to do with a city’s professional sports teams (or lack thereof).<sup>47</sup> The economic benefits of major league franchises for their respective cities are usually overstated by the press, sports organizations, and those who would directly profit from the construction of a stadium and the existence of a local sports team.<sup>48</sup> For example, Mark Rosentraub asserts that the

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<sup>45</sup> “Stadium called a builder of pride,” *Detroit News*, 15 Sept 1971.

<sup>46</sup> This way of thinking certainly was not unique to Detroit’s civic leaders. Michael Danielson argues that major league sports teams “attract far more attention in the local press than do other businesses; they carry the local banner to stadiums, arenas, television screens, and sports pages across the continent;” Danielson, *Home Team*, 102.

<sup>47</sup> Danielson, *Home Team*, 107-8.

<sup>48</sup> Danielson, *Home Team*, 110.

construction of Market Square Arena and the Hoosier Dome in downtown Indianapolis during the 1970s and 1980s had little effect on the gradual exodus of residents from downtown into the surrounding suburbs. Efforts to stall the flow of suburbanization in Indianapolis had similar results to those cities without downtown stadiums.<sup>49</sup> Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist claim that the value in professional sports teams is found in “externalities,” benefits which those who are neither buyers nor sellers accrue through professional sports. Those individuals who find entertainment reading a newspaper about a local sports team or watching a game on television are benefiting from that team and stadium, although those benefits cannot be accurately assessed. The authors argue that politicians and team officials often exaggerate the economic benefits of a new stadium (which are rarely enough to offset public subsidies) but fail to emphasize the value in these externalities.<sup>50</sup>

The artificial limit on the number of professional sports franchises contributed to the perceived importance of “major league” status. The 1960s witnessed a growing competition between cities for the privilege of hosting major league teams. The most notable example of such competition occurred in the mid-1960s between Milwaukee and Atlanta. The Milwaukee Braves had played their home games at County Stadium in Milwaukee since 1953, when they moved west from Boston. After being sold in 1964,

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<sup>49</sup> Mark S. Rosentraub, “Stadiums and Urban Space,” in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes: The Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Stadiums*, ed. Roger G. Noll and Andrew Zimbalist (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 206.

<sup>50</sup> Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist, “Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Facilities,” in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes*, 56-58; For a similar conclusion, see also Andrew Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 123-33.



the Braves' new owners sought a richer market for their franchise.<sup>51</sup> Several cities were interested in acquiring a major league team, particularly Atlanta. Even before anyone agreed to move to Atlanta, the city paid for a multi-purpose stadium in the hopes of attracting a franchise. Atlanta newspaper columnists gave their full support to the construction of a municipal stadium, and Atlanta citizens voted to spend public dollars on a new facility. Braves fans had supported the team since its arrival in Milwaukee, and Braves home attendance was consistently near the top of the National League, although total attendance dipped slightly in 1962 and 1963. But the Braves owners claimed they could make more money in Atlanta's larger television market and did not have to use team revenues to build a new stadium.<sup>52</sup> First the Braves, then the Dodgers and Giants, now the Braves again—team owners realized that competition between cities to become part of the major leagues gave them a strategic advantage in their efforts to build new municipal facilities.

Part of the impetus to create urban redevelopment projects such as municipal stadiums came from federal legislation and programs intended to create jobs and improve urban infrastructure. Members of the Michigan State Fair Authority asked Governor George Romney in January 1963 for state funds for the stadium project because of the opportunity to receive matching funds from the federal Area Redevelopment Administration and Community Facilities Administration's Accelerated Public Works

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<sup>51</sup> Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism: How Milwaukee Lost the Braves," *Business History Review* 69, no. 4 (1995), 541-43.

<sup>52</sup> Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 555.

Program.<sup>53</sup> Federal funds were available from various similar programs that encouraged urban redevelopment. The Michigan State Fair Authority was just one of several similar agencies across the country that felt compelled to institute urban redevelopment projects because of the opportunity to bring federal dollars into their respective cities.

Even if no federal funds were available, though, city leaders in Detroit and throughout the country likely would have pursued civic stadium construction anyway because of the perceived economic benefit it would provide to the city and region. In St. Louis, for example, executive director of the Land Clearance and Housing Authority, Charles L. Farris, argued in 1958 for the construction of a downtown stadium adjacent to the shopping and financial districts.<sup>54</sup> Business in the downtown district had been lagging for several years as residents moved to the suburbs and developers built malls and shopping centers to meet the needs of suburbanites. Leading businessmen in St. Louis who supported the project declared that the stadium plan was “a program dedicated to civic progress having as its prime objective the revitalization of downtown St. Louis. Urban renewal by planned redevelopment is its means of implementation.”<sup>55</sup>

Along with the influx of federal dollars into the Detroit area, the State Fair Authority claimed that a new stadium and the presentation of the Summer Olympics would bring more than enough revenue to offset the cost of construction and operation. In a 1963 University of Michigan economic study, researchers argued that a Detroit

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<sup>53</sup> Letter from Michigan State Fair Authority, State Fairgrounds Development Commission, to George Romney, Governor, 28 January 1963, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 9.

<sup>54</sup> “How St. Louis Seeks Stadium,” *Detroit News*, 4 March 1962.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Olympiad and Olympic Stadium “would help create a more favorable impression of Michigan and its economic climate and vigor. The teamwork required for successfully fulfilling the obligations inherent in the invitation to hold the Games in Detroit would dramatically illustrate the ability of Michigan’s social, civic, governmental, and political groups to work together to achieve important objectives.” They admit that such benefits are impossible to quantify, but “they probably far exceed the tangible benefits which can be identified and measured.”<sup>56</sup>

In terms of tangible benefits, the University of Michigan report listed four major types of expenditures which the Olympic Games and a new civic stadium would stimulate. First, “consumption expenditures” such as spending on hotels, restaurants, and various retail stores would increase in the Olympic area. Second, funds spent on construction of facilities and infrastructure improvements represent “capital expenditures.” The third category, “derived expenditures,” uses the multiplier effect of economic theory, which states that any money brought into businesses such as hotels, restaurants, etc., will eventually be re-spent and filtered throughout the community. The value of the initial expenditures, therefore, is much higher than the amount initially spent. “Derived expenditures” include the multiplier effect of initial expenditures as well as the re-spending of “capital expenditures.” The final category, “stimulated expenditures”

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<sup>56</sup> Preliminary Evaluation of the Potential Impact of the Olympic Games on the Economy of Michigan; Alfred W. Swinyard, Director, and James N. Vedder, Research Associate, Bureau of Business Research, University of Michigan, 14 March 1963, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 9.

represents money invested on new hotels, restaurants, shopping districts, and other business opportunities as a result of the Olympic Games and the Olympic stadium.<sup>57</sup>

### **Renovating the State Fairgrounds**

In order for the Fairgrounds to play a part in Detroit's redevelopment, though, the Development Commission and the State Fair Authority needed to create a plan to attract visitors to the Fairgrounds throughout the entire year. Even record attendance at the State Fair would not bring in enough revenue if no one visited the site during the other fifty-one weeks of the year. Many of the events which the Fairgrounds previously hosted were now moving into Cobo Hall, the new, state-of-the-art arena and convention hall along the riverfront. The State Fair Development Commission celebrated a new attendance record of more than 825,000 for the Michigan State Fair, but lamented the fact that the Fairgrounds "lost some of its major exhibitors during the past several years, and we will undoubtedly lose more as time goes on." The State Fair Development Commission Report for 1960 cited the construction of Cobo Hall and the deteriorating condition of facilities at the Fairgrounds.<sup>58</sup> The Commission had similar worries the following year, stating that "the problem basically lies in the contrast between the new and spacious Cobo Hall, and the aging appearance of the State Fair facilities. Until a steadfast, purposeful program of rehabilitation and improvement is undertaken, the Fairgrounds will continue to lose events and money."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Michigan State Fair Annual Report, 1960, Library of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

<sup>59</sup> Michigan State Fair Annual Report, 1961, Library of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

The Development Commission believed it would take a major overhaul of the Fairgrounds to bring people to the site year-round. One executive committee member wanted to create a “Disneyland type of project” which would offer several entertainment options to attract visitors of various ages. According to a summary of a November 1961 meeting of the Development Commission, the same member believed that the main concept for the Fairgrounds “should be not just another stadium or any other kind of structure, but the greatest utilization of the land with the ground floors of all buildings being reserved for use of the Michigan State Fair during the Fair season.”<sup>60</sup> The stadium was an important component of this plan, but many members of the Development Commission envisioned a much broader and more varied use of the available land than just a sports complex.

If such a plan were to be realized, the next step was to determine what types of buildings, business, and entertainment options would make up the “Disneyland” atmosphere that the Development Commission members envisioned. In February 1962, just a few months after the committee’s establishment, the Development Commission proposed a massive overhaul of the entire Fairgrounds site. They called for a youth building with space for junior exhibitions and an ice skating rink; a dormitory for those junior exhibitors; an automobile center designed for exhibitions of Michigan-made cars and trucks; a merchandise mart with restaurants, salesrooms, and office facilities; public gardens and parks; a family amusement area similar to Disneyland; a community arts

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<sup>60</sup> Summary of first State Fair Grounds Development Commission meeting, 17 November 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 9.

building; and the civic stadium.<sup>61</sup> The value of the State Fairgrounds land gave organizers even more incentive to maximize its use. Many felt that construction costs would largely pay for themselves if they could increase the value of the land.

The desire among stadium planners to adopt a Disney approach to the project indicates influence from citizens' concerns regarding contemporary urban society. After Disneyland opened in 1955, entrepreneurs and city leaders recognized that much of the park's appeal came from its cleanliness, order, and safety, a "controlled leisure environment."<sup>62</sup> Those qualities could be recreated in cultural institutions across the country to generate the same type of appeal. Similar projects throughout the United States during the late 1950s and early 1960s incorporated fantasy elements intended to provide city residents and tourists with the safe and clean elements of urban life while excluding any of the more unsavory aspects. In other words, planners attempted to create a sanitized version of urban America. The Seattle Center, a culture and entertainment district built in downtown Seattle as part of the 1962 World's Fair, is one such urban development project that symbolized a tightly controlled, sanitized urban space.<sup>63</sup>

The desire among Americans for a safe and sanitized leisure environment was largely a reaction against the disorder of postwar urban America. After World War II, cities faced an urban crisis in which low-income blacks moved into central cities, upper-

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<sup>61</sup> State Fair Grounds Development Commission, Progress Report, February 1962, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 15.

<sup>62</sup> John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 41.

<sup>63</sup> See John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

and middle-class whites moved to the surrounding suburbs, cities' tax bases decreased, and urban poverty increased along with crime rates. Many white suburbanites no longer felt safe within such a demographically-mixed environment. Planners, therefore, created shopping malls, theme parks, entertainment districts, museums, sport facilities, and other cultural institutions with orderliness and the perceived safety of patrons in mind.<sup>64</sup> The State Fair Development Commission addressed citizens' concerns and sought to create a safe environment for which suburbanites would be willing to venture into the city.

### **Ford and Fetzer Remain Uncommitted to Fairgrounds Location**

Those plans would be all for naught, though, if the commission could not get prospective tenants to commit to the stadium project. As Walter Goodman and the Development Commission hoped Fetzer would eventually agree to move the Tigers to the Fairgrounds, they attempted to convince other groups to commit to the new stadium. Maximizing potential revenue through tenant commitments was the surest way to gain public approval for the project. In November 1961, Thomas Lane, vice chairman of the commission's Activities Planning Committee, claimed that directors at the University of Detroit were interested in moving their home football games to the Olympic stadium, since their current stadium's capacity was only around 17,000.<sup>65</sup> The university's

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<sup>64</sup> For analyses of theme park planning in urban culture, see Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: HBJ, 1986); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990); Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Noonday, 1992); Findlay, *Magic Lands*; Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* (London, Routledge, 1998); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Draft of Free Press article from Dick Frederick, Detroit Free Press, to Michigan State Fair, 17 November 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 8.

administration wanted to move forward with construction projects, and if athletic events were held at the Fairgrounds stadium, the university could demolish its existing stadium and use the site for new construction.<sup>66</sup> But the economic success of the Olympic stadium hinged on the Tigers and Lions, not the University of Detroit. The Activities Planning Committee concluded that “a contract with U. of D. was not sufficient in itself to satisfy bonding companies as to the soundness of proposed Fairgrounds revenue bonds.” Altogether, though, commitments from the Tigers, Lions, and University of Detroit “would constitute sufficient evidence of soundness for the successful issuance of revenue bonds.”<sup>67</sup>

Detroit Lions owner William Clay Ford was most eager to move his team into a new stadium. He had grown tired of seeing his football team play its home games in Tiger Stadium, a facility designed for baseball. As early as 1961, Ford complained that Tiger Stadium’s capacity of 55,000 was not enough, claiming the Lions could average over 70,000 fans per home game.<sup>68</sup> Also, the design of the stadium, with the best seats stretching from third base around home plate to first base, was ill-equipped to maximize revenue for football. Ford wanted a horseshoe-shaped facility which would emphasize the seats between each endzone as the premium seats for watching a football game.

The Lions had been in Detroit since 1934 and had played their home games in Tiger Stadium since 1938. In their early years in Detroit, the Lions attracted relatively

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<sup>66</sup> Summary of Activities Planning Committee meeting for the State Fair Grounds Development Commission, 20 December 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 2.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Summary of Activities Planning Committee meeting for the State Fair Grounds Development Commission, 20 December 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 2.



small crowds compared to thirty years later. The National Football League was still in its infancy during the 1930s, and it was not until the 1960s that professional football rivaled baseball as America's most popular sport. Much of this growing popularity resulted from the successful marriage of professional football and television. Football was much better suited for television than baseball. Its time structure of a sixty-minute game was more strictly defined than baseball's nine innings. Games were split up into four quarters of fifteen minutes each. Most games were played in about three hours while the length of baseball games often depended upon the number of hits, the number of runs scored, the amount of time a pitcher took between pitches, the number of times a manager called a new pitcher into the game, and the possibility of extra innings. Also, the action of a football game was much easier to fit within a single camera shot, and each play was more action-filled than the average moment in a baseball game. Overall, football was better suited to attract television viewers.<sup>69</sup>

Because of the Lions' popularity throughout the metropolitan area in the 1960s, Ford realized he now had the leverage to demand financial assistance from the city of Detroit or the surrounding suburbs for the construction of a stadium designed specifically for football. Ford was willing to share a stadium with John Fetzer and the Detroit Tigers, but he wanted the Lions to have their own facilities within the stadium, and he wanted the design of the stadium to be geared toward the football viewing experience, not baseball. Edwin Anderson, executive vice president of the Detroit Lions, told Alfred Glancy of the State Fairgrounds Development Commission that "we want our facilities [offices, locker

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<sup>69</sup> Craig R. Coenen, *From Sandlots to the Super Bowl: The National Football League, 1920-1967* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 161-2.

rooms, etc.] to be completely divorced from the baseball operation.”<sup>70</sup> The Lions refused to take a back seat to the Tigers in a new civic stadium. In December 1961, Ford advised the Activities Planning Committee of the Development Commission that the Lions had signed a new five-year lease to remain in Tiger Stadium but were eager to move to a new location as soon as possible.<sup>71</sup>

Tigers owner John Fetzer felt less urgency to move his team from Tiger Stadium, although he was not entirely resistant to the idea. The ballpark, built in 1912, was designed specifically for baseball, and most players and managers considered it one of the best ballparks in the American League for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Previous owners Frank Navin and Walter Briggs ordered renovations of the stadium during the 1920s and 1930s to boost attendance. In 1923, Navin added a second deck to the existing grandstand, bringing the seating capacity from 23,000 to just over 30,000.<sup>72</sup> Walter Briggs completed a second deck which encircled the entire playing field in 1938, and a record crowd of 54,500 watched the Tigers open the 1938 baseball

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<sup>70</sup> Letter from Edwin Anderson, Exec VP of Lions, to Alfred Glancy, Chairman of Development Committee, Michigan State Fair, 21 February 1969, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

<sup>71</sup> Summary of Activities Planning Committee meeting for the State Fair Grounds Development Commission, 20 December 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 36 Folder 2.

<sup>72</sup> “Record Attendance to Witness Opener,” *Detroit Free Press*, 26 Apr 1923, 18; Navin and the Tigers allowed for overflow attendance in the home opener in April 1923, bringing more than 36,000 into the stadium. But the actual number of seats was around 30,000.

season.<sup>73</sup> The Tigers consistently ranked in the top third of American and National League teams for home attendance from the 1920s to the early 1960s.<sup>74</sup>

By the 1960s, however, Fetzer became concerned with the development of new highways in Detroit near Tiger Stadium. Some of the new highway construction separated Tiger Stadium from many of its traditional parking areas, possibly cutting off an important source of revenue for the team. In a December 1961 meeting, members of the Activities Planning Committee of the State Fairgrounds Development Commission wondered whether Fetzer would prefer changing his team's location as a result of the parking problems associated with highway construction near Tiger Stadium. The committee was advised that the Tigers were conducting a survey to determine the volume of parking availability in the Tiger Stadium vicinity. In the committee's estimation, the results of the parking survey "would be very decisive in determining the Tigers' long-range location planning."<sup>75</sup>

Highway development throughout the region became a factor not just in Fetzer's decision on the future of Tiger Stadium, but also on the decision to build the new Olympic stadium at the State Fairgrounds. Many of the newly-built or proposed highways in the Detroit region made travel from suburban counties to the Fairgrounds much easier and faster than before. *The Pontiac Press* claimed that "fans from Oakland,

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<sup>73</sup> "Tigers Beaten as Crowd Sets a City Record," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 Apr 1938, 1.

<sup>74</sup> "All-Time Attendance by Decade," *Ballparksofbaseball.com*, accessed January 23, 2014. <http://www.ballparksofbaseball.com/AllTimeAttendance.htm>.

<sup>75</sup> Summary of Activities Planning Committee meeting for the State Fair Grounds Development Commission, 20 December 1961, Box 36 Folder 2, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Library of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

Macomb, Washtenaw, Genesee, Livingston and St. Clair counties will find it easy and convenient to drive to the fair grounds, which is about two miles from the proposed Chrysler Expressway.”<sup>76</sup> The Chrysler Expressway (part of Interstate-75) provided an easy access route to residents of the north suburbs while the Lodge Freeway (to northwest suburbs) and Edsel Ford Freeway (northeast) would allow Fairgrounds patrons to come into the city, spend their entertainment dollars, and return to suburbia quickly and easily. A new stadium at the Fairgrounds would be a facility for “all the citizens of Michigan. Any large athletic event which is held in Detroit expects to attract spectators from outstate.”<sup>77</sup> Many outstate Michigan residents and their local newspapers were adamant that an Olympic stadium built on state property and partially funded with state dollars should be geared toward residents throughout the state, not just in the city of Detroit.

Despite Fetzer’s concerns about the new highways and their effect on operations at Tiger Stadium, he publicly maintained that he was happy in Tiger Stadium and had little interest in abandoning such a valuable asset to move into the Olympic stadium. In August 1962, he expressed such a sentiment to Thomas Lane of the State Fairgrounds Development Commission. Fetzer explained that “Tiger Stadium has been considered one of the foremost baseball plants in the country due to its fine facilities and its downtown location.”<sup>78</sup> Although Tiger Stadium was showing signs of age by the early

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<sup>76</sup> “Fair Grounds is Perfect for Future Stadium Site,” *Pontiac Press*, 7 March 1962.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Letter from John Fetzer to Thomas Lane, Thomas E. Lane Co., 31 August 1962, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

1960s, it still drew well over one million spectators each year and was worth far too much money for Fetzer to simply abandon the property.

### **Where to Build? Debating the Fairgrounds Location**

Before Fetzer could decide whether to leave Tiger Stadium, city leaders and stadium planners needed to provide specific details to prospective tenants, particularly the type of stadium to be built (seating capacity, layout, etc.) and the location of the stadium. Politics certainly played a role in the development of a stadium plan as well as in the debate over the stadium's location. Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh won the 1961 election by describing himself as the "People's Mayor." He reached out to the black community, and his victory demonstrated the political power black Detroiters were building by the early 1960s.<sup>79</sup> Bringing the Olympics to Detroit and building a new civic stadium which would be the focal point of a redevelopment plan for the city would solidify his place in Detroit's history and revive the city's sluggish economy. But Cavanagh was not as interested as the Development Commission in building the stadium at the State Fairgrounds. Cavanagh envisioned the stadium as part of a downtown redevelopment project along the Detroit River. Cobo Hall opened in 1960 and was one of the finest convention centers and exhibition halls in the world. Cavanagh wanted the Olympic stadium and Cobo Hall to stand together as a showcase of Detroit's economic vitality and cultural dominance.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Darden, *Race and Uneven Development*, 205.

<sup>80</sup> "Fair Grounds is Perfect for Future Stadium Site," *Pontiac Press*, 7 March 1962.

Cavanagh found little support for the downtown stadium plan among state legislators and in the governor's office. John Swainson served as governor during Cavanagh's first two years in office and stood firmly behind the plan to build the stadium at the Fairgrounds. Swainson had his reservations, cautioning a group of Fairgrounds stadium supporters that "no enterprise should be considered unless it contributed to the State Fair and the public good," but he believed that with the proper planning and financing, the Fairgrounds would be the most practical location for the Olympic stadium.<sup>81</sup> Swainson's successor, George Romney, also preferred locating the new stadium at the Fairgrounds. The Fairgrounds was close to the population center of the metropolitan area, and would allow as many Michigan citizens as possible to feel included in the stadium process.<sup>82</sup> This was not a stadium for Detroit. It was a stadium for Michigan. The other major advantage the Fairgrounds held over any downtown site was the fact that the state already owned the property. No land acquisition costs were needed if the stadium were built at Eight Mile and Woodward.<sup>83</sup>

Detroiters who supported the Detroit Olympic Committee's efforts to bring the Olympics to the Motor City were sometimes hesitant to build a massive Olympic stadium on the State Fairgrounds site. Olga M. Madar, a member of the State Fairgrounds Development Commission, remained skeptical of the benefits of an Olympic stadium on the Fairgrounds property. She claimed that promoting an Olympic stadium on the site

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<sup>81</sup> Draft of Free Press article from Dick Frederick, Detroit Free Press, to Michigan State Fair, 17 November 1961, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 8.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from William Clay Ford to Roman Gribbs, 4 March 1970, DEDC, Box 4 Folder 11.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

would “handicap our efforts to achieve the stated objective of the Commission to ‘Examine the potential for using the Fairgrounds for permanent year-round cultural, recreational, educational activities providing a wide range of services to citizens of Michigan.’”<sup>84</sup> The Fairgrounds were intended, in Madar’s estimation, to host the annual State Fair and provide opportunities for educational and entertainment activities related to the Fairgrounds’ agricultural heritage. The construction of a civic stadium on the site was outside the intended use of the site and could have a negative effect on the overall operation of the Fairgrounds, especially if the proposed Disneyland-type entertainment center came to fruition.

Like Madar, Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh opposed the construction of the civic stadium on the State Fairgrounds site, albeit for different reasons. Cavanagh preferred a downtown site for the stadium along the city’s riverfront and sought support for a riverfront stadium throughout his tenure as mayor. Cavanagh wanted a downtown stadium as part of a major riverfront development project intended to bring citizens (especially suburbanites) downtown. He proposed the civic stadium alongside Cobo Hall and a system of parks and walkways along the riverfront. Even after his own Stadium Committee recommended the Fairgrounds site as the most logical and most practical location for a new stadium, Cavanagh insisted that the stadium should be one of the main components in rebuilding the downtown riverfront area.

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<sup>84</sup> “A Record of Position Taken Regarding Civic Stadium While Member of State Fairgrounds Development Commission,” by Olga M. Madar, member of Fairgrounds Development Commission, 14 March 1962, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

Many of the politicians and business leaders who led the planning and construction of municipal stadiums across the country claimed that new, modern civic stadiums could serve as centerpieces of urban redevelopment projects. E. Carlton Heeseler, an expert in municipal financing, maintained that “the physical location of the coliseum within the community is of paramount importance, particularly if the facility is planned to be a focal point of the cultural and sports events of the city.”<sup>85</sup> Cavanagh, Romney, and the other central figures in the Detroit stadium saga realized the potential for subsequent development around the stadium and the opportunity to revitalize an entire neighborhood, making the decision on location even more important.

To conclude that stadium planners were in agreement on the State Fairgrounds site from the beginning would be to simplify the story. Cavanagh certainly preferred a downtown location, but he was not the only person suggesting a site other than the Fairgrounds. Several other locations throughout the metropolitan area were suggested, and many of these had unique advantages compared to the other possible sites. In June 1968, residents of Walled Lake, Troy, Dearborn, and Pontiac expressed their desire to build the stadium within their respective city limits. Walled Lake’s City Manager Royce Downey felt that a strategic location for the stadium would be along the proposed I-275 expressway, which would have stretched from Toledo to Bay City and would have

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<sup>85</sup> “Financing Stadiums and Coliseums,” E. Carlton Heeseler, Kidder, Peabody, & Co. Inc., date unknown, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 9.



allowed many suburban residents to have easy access to the stadium without having to drive through Detroit.<sup>86</sup>

### **Stadium Design: Taking Cues from Projects in Other Cities**

Aside from the important decision on where to build, Detroit's stadium planners also needed to develop a specific plan for the design of the civic stadium. After several multi-purpose, civic stadiums opened in Washington, D.C., Anaheim, and Houston in the early 1960s, city leaders throughout the country looked closely at those stadiums to determine what design might work best in their own cities. Washington's D.C. Stadium (later named Robert F. Kennedy Stadium) was a massive, open-air facility that could be used for baseball, football, and several other sporting and entertainment events. The stadium's cavernous dimensions made it less than ideal for baseball, though, since the best baseball parks often have a sense of intimacy in which spectators feel close to the action.<sup>87</sup> The Houston Astrodome's seating arrangement kept fans at a distance from the playing field as well, but its domed roof and futuristic design made it the envy of other cities.

Members of the State Fair Development Committee viewed the Astrodome as the way of the future in stadium construction. Uncovered stadiums relied on mild temperatures and dry weather in order to maximize attendance. Detroit's extreme weather could pose problems for groups hosting events at the stadium. Winter could bring snow, ice, freezing temperatures, and dangerous driving conditions which would

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<sup>86</sup> "Walled Lake Bids for New Stadium," *The Pontiac Press*, by Don Vogel, 13 June 1968.

<sup>87</sup> Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, Fenway Park in Boston, Chicago's Wrigley Field, and Tiger Stadium in Detroit are examples of this intimate atmosphere.

likely affect attendance numbers. Summer weather in Michigan is sometimes uncomfortably hot and humid, causing some potential attendees to stay home or find other entertainment options. A domed stadium, though, would ensure seventy-degree temperatures and would maximize revenues since conventions, sporting contests, and other events could be held year-round.

For some Development Committee members, building an undomed stadium was not an option. The Astrodome started a trend in stadium construction in which citizens in subsequent cities expected a facility as good as, or better than, other stadiums in existence. Committee chairman Alfred Glancy appeared on *The Lou Gordon Show*, a popular local television talk show, to publicize the efforts of the Development Committee and to rally support for the Olympic stadium. In describing his position on a possible domed stadium, Glancy explained:

If you were going to build a shopping center, an office building, I don't care what you're going to build, unless you air condition it today, Lou, you're building obsolescence, in whatever structure you're getting, and, this applies particularly, to a stadium, which, whose primary function is to hold sporting events, entertainment, political gatherings, gatherings of large segments of people to be entertained, be instructed, have horseshows, all sorts of events can take place, but, it has to be free of weather.<sup>88</sup>

Glancy represented the modernist viewpoint of the 1960s. Function superseded form in architectural design. Glancy showed no indication of a romantic, pastoral affection toward baseball parks. Such affection certainly existed among some sports enthusiasts during this period, but most baseball and football fans preferred watching a game in comfort over any aesthetic appeal a stadium may offer. Further, some citizens believed

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<sup>88</sup> Transcript, Lou Gordon Show, Interview with Alfred Glancy, chairman of Development Committee of Michigan State Fair, 24 September 1967, Michigan State Fair and Fairgrounds Collection, Box 35 Folder 8.

that a massive, symmetrical, domed, Astroturf-laden facility was more visually appealing than a classical structure with columns, ornamental designs, and quirky field dimensions.

Tigers owner John Fetzer agreed with Glancy that domed roofs were quickly becoming a necessary component of a modern stadium. In 1966, Fetzer expressed his support to Mayor Cavanagh for a new civic stadium, stating that “a stadium of the domed type should be a fundamental consideration. We believe that in the future all stadiums in the northern part of the United States, where weather has become such an onerous problem, will ultimately be domed.”<sup>89</sup> Fetzer was a successful businessman who had a reputation for making sound, dispassionate decisions. He acknowledged that Tiger Stadium was “one of the best maintained stadiums of the older vintage in the major leagues,” but he believed the Tigers would fall behind their competitors if they rejected an offer to play in a domed stadium.<sup>90</sup>

By 1967, many of the pieces of Detroit’s stadium plan were falling into place. The city’s prospects for hosting the Olympics were grim after losing the 1968 games to Mexico City, but civic leaders in Detroit and Lansing were turning their attention away from an Olympic stadium and toward a facility designed specifically for professional football and baseball. William Clay Ford and John Fetzer stated their interest in moving to a new stadium, and the project had the support of economists and urban planners who claimed civic stadiums were catalysts for urban economic revitalization. Also, the state legislature took steps to ensure financial support from the state to fund construction.

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<sup>89</sup> Letter from John Fetzer to Jerome Cavanagh, 12 January 1966, DEDC, Box 4 Folder 15.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

There were still issues to be resolved, especially Cavanagh's resistance to the Fairgrounds location and disagreements between Ford and Fetzer over the design and specifications of the stadium, but it seemed that these were minor problems to be resolved would not stand in the way of the eventual construction of the stadium.

But social and economic issues loomed on the horizon for Detroit. The July 1967 riot was one of the worst urban disorders of the twentieth century and brought international attention to the city's racial divisions and extreme poverty. It also caused Cavanagh and other city leaders to divert their attention from projects such as the civic stadium in the riot's aftermath. The violence and destruction of the riot were so catastrophic that they required massive amounts of city resources to restore order to the city and to start the rebuilding process. Planning for the civic stadium continued, but it became a secondary concern as Detroit became a national symbol of urban decay, poverty, and racial discord.

CHAPTER THREE  
STADIUM STALEMATE: WILLIAM CLAY FORD CONSIDERS LEAVING  
DETROIT

The Michigan State Fairgrounds seemed the most likely site for a future civic stadium throughout the first half of the 1960s. Governor Romney repeatedly stated his preference for the Fairgrounds, believing a stadium could revitalize the area and bring in additional revenues to the state through ticket sales and development in the surrounding neighborhoods. Mayor Cavanagh also voiced his support for a stadium at the Fairgrounds. Cavanagh believed that Detroiters could benefit from a stadium at the Eight Mile and Woodward location without having to commit city funds to the project. Finally, the Fairgrounds stadium had the approval of the two main tenants in a potential facility. Lions owner William Clay Ford wanted to move his team out of Tiger Stadium and into a building more suitable for football. Located near the population center for the metropolitan area, the Fairgrounds were accessible to Lions fans both in Detroit and throughout the surrounding suburbs. Likewise, Detroit Tigers owner John Fetzer was willing to move his team into a new facility, as long as he was compensated for the value of the Tiger Stadium property. In January 1966, Fetzer assured Cavanagh that he supported the construction of a new facility, but with a couple important caveats. Fetzer warned Cavanagh:

The Detroit Baseball Club would, of course, need restitution for economic loss from the abandonment of its property now located on Michigan and Trumbull. I am sure you are aware of the fact that we have one of the best maintained

stadiums of the older vintage in the major leagues...To us a stadium of the domed type should be a fundamental consideration. We believe that in the future all stadiums in the northern part of the United States, where weather has become such an onerous problem, will ultimately be domed.<sup>1</sup>

Meeting Fetzer's demands would be no small feat. Compensating the Tigers for abandoning Tiger Stadium and building a dome on the new ballpark would add several million dollars to the new stadium project. Nevertheless, all principal parties seemed to be in agreement that the Fairgrounds site was the best and most logical location for a multi-purpose stadium.

But two conflicting factors were at play as the 1960s progressed. Suburbanization and urban renewal combined to slow the progress of stadium planning as competing groups fought to position themselves and their respective interests as leaders in a post-industrial urban society. Civic leaders in Taylor, Southfield, Pontiac, and several other suburbs saw an opportunity to bring prestige to their cities along with the perceived economic benefits of hosting a professional sports franchise.<sup>2</sup> Southfield and Pontiac presented the most complete and detailed stadium proposals, but leaders in other suburban cities also recognized the changing nature of urban America and realized they could now challenge the preeminence of central cities. In contrast, leaders in urban centers fought to preserve their dominance over the burgeoning suburbs. One way to do that was to maintain important symbols of urban culture, including major league sports. In the early and mid-1960s, Cavanagh stated repeatedly that building a downtown

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from John Fetzer to Cavanagh, 12 January 1966, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 304 Folder 2.

<sup>2</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, the vast majority of the scholarly literature on the economic effects of stadium development shows that sports stadiums and franchises bring minimal economic benefits to a city or region.

stadium would likely require too much money from the city to be a worthwhile project. But as suburban leaders made their best sales pitches to Ford and Fetzer, Cavanagh began to side with downtown interest groups who saw a civic stadium as an opportunity to revitalize the central business district and the rest of downtown Detroit while maintaining the Motor City's cultural dominance over the region.

This is not to suggest, however, that all central cities throughout America suffered from economic decline while all suburbs were thriving. Certainly, many of Detroit's suburbs relied heavily on the automobile industry for a steady labor market and tax base. Many suburbs throughout the Detroit metropolitan area saw tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs disappear throughout the 1960s as deindustrialization and corporate restructuring either eliminated positions or moved them to more tax-friendly regions of the country. Between 1950 and 1960, the Detroit metropolitan area's national share of automobile employment dropped from fifty-six percent to forty percent.<sup>3</sup> Southfield, a northern suburb of Detroit in Oakland County, was one such community which wanted to lure Detroit's professional teams as a way to gain cultural prestige and revitalize an economically depressed neighborhood. A Fairgrounds stadium would have been easily accessible for suburbanites, especially residents of Southfield, but it would have reinforced Detroit's cultural hegemony within the metropolitan area.

Essentially, the mid- to late-1960s was a period of stalemate for the stadium project. Cavanagh couldn't decide whether the Fairgrounds or downtown location was more suitable for a municipal stadium. Fairgrounds and downtown organizers were unwilling to concede to the other in their attempts to lure William Clay Ford and John

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<sup>3</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 128.

Fetzer. The growing political and economic influence of Detroit's suburbs led William Clay Ford to wonder whether his team might be more profitable outside the central city. These conflicting forces resulted in very little progress on the stadium issue and led to growing frustration among the major individuals involved in the project, especially William Clay Ford, who wanted a new stadium for his football team, whether that was in Detroit or elsewhere in the metropolitan region.

### **Downtown Stadium Plan Gains Momentum**

Although Cavanagh maintained his preference for a Fairgrounds stadium throughout much of the mid-1960s, some city officials claimed that a downtown facility would be of great benefit to the city and the region. In February 1962, Detroit's chief city planner recommended a downtown stadium near the central business district and the Civic Center. Such a facility, the planner argued, could contribute to economically revitalizing the central business district and would help to maximize the revenue of existing parking facilities. The two main locations proposed were immediately west of 3<sup>rd</sup> Street near the Civic Center and immediately east of Tiger Stadium just off the Lodge Expressway.<sup>4</sup> Of the two locations, the Tiger Stadium site was farther from the central business district but still easily within walking distance.

William Clay Ford was receptive to the idea of a downtown stadium, but he seemed willing to support any stadium proposal in which the facility was designed for football and in which he would not use his own money for construction. During the mid-1960s, much of the discussion revolved around the State Fairgrounds plan. Ford asked

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<sup>4</sup> Memo from F.P. Bennett, Head City Planner, to C.A. Blessing, Director of City Planning, RE: Stadium Site Analysis, 27 February 1962, Box 17 Folder 20, Jerome Cavanagh Collection.



Cavanagh in November 1964 for his support in developing a stadium plan, claiming that Detroit “lags badly behind the average large city when it comes to a stadium.” He also appealed to Cavanagh’s sense of his own political legacy in Detroit while emphasizing the immediate need for such a facility. Ford told Cavanagh that “the time has come when a decision must be made to erect a modern stadium to house all sports and sporting events. The actual construction of a modern facility during your regime would be a great thing for you.”<sup>5</sup> But at that time, Cavanagh was not swayed by Ford’s sales pitch, responding that “the City’s financial resources are limited and among the unmet needs of the community are many which involve a greater urgency than the project which you propose.” If the state wanted to commit its own resources to a Fairgrounds stadium, Cavanagh said he would support it, but he refused to divert city dollars from more pressing concerns, particularly during an era in which the major automotive companies were closing Detroit plants and decentralizing.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the recommendations of his own city planners and the overtures of William Clay Ford, Cavanagh insisted publicly that any stadium built for the Tigers and Lions would be done without financial assistance from the city. In early 1965, his assistant, John Casey, responded to a concerned citizen that “other unmet needs of the City have higher priority in spending the limited financial resources of the City. Meaning there are other things more in the community interest in which we should invest our

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from William Clay Ford to Cavanagh, 23 November 1964, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 169 Folder 20.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Cavanagh to William Clay Ford, 31 December 1964, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 169 Folder 20

money.”<sup>7</sup> That citizen proposed that the city pursue a civic stadium as part of an urban renewal plan, meaning federal dollars could be used on the project, but Casey argued that the city would still have to pay one-third of the costs to acquire the necessary land. Cavanagh seemed resolute in his insistence that no city funds be used on a future stadium.

Part of Cavanagh’s refusal to use city resources for a professional sport facility stemmed from Governor George Romney’s apparent eagerness to commit state funds to the project. Romney celebrated the passage of two stadium bills in the State Legislature’s 1963 session to create a state stadium authority which would issue revenue bonds for Fairgrounds stadium construction. Like many other civic leaders throughout the country during the 1960s, Romney claimed that a new stadium would represent Michigan’s cultural and economic renaissance. According to Romney, the legislature’s actions represented “the first step in restoring Michigan’s lost national prestige.”<sup>8</sup> Cavanagh agreed with Romney that a brand new stadium could convince the International Olympic Committee to award the Olympics to Detroit and serve as a symbol of Michigan’s resurgence. If Romney was willing and able to commit state resources to the project, however, Cavanagh saw no reason to risk any political capital through the use of city funds.

Suddenly, Cavanagh changed course in 1966. He voiced his unequivocal support for a downtown stadium, claiming that the economic benefits to downtown would

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from John P. Casey, Assistant to the Mayor, to Cornelius J. Huysken, 7 January 1965, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 234 Folder 18.

<sup>8</sup> “Governor Hails Votes for Stadium,” *Detroit News*, 16 March 1963.

outweigh any costs paid by the city. A few important factors help to explain why Cavanagh's preference for a stadium at the Fairgrounds waned throughout the mid-1960s. First, Cavanagh and Romney were political adversaries throughout the decade. The fact that Romney was spearheading the campaign to build a Fairgrounds stadium might have been reason alone for Cavanagh to prefer a different location. Second, and probably more significant, by the late 1960s Cavanagh and the Detroit Olympic Committee had all but given up hope that the Motor City would host the Summer Olympics. Since the new stadium would be designed and constructed for professional sporting events rather than the Olympics, stadium planners no longer needed additional land around the stadium for an Olympic village and other facilities.

Also, economic and cultural developments in other cities likely influenced Cavanagh's decision to support a downtown stadium over the Fairgrounds location. Downtown Detroit was quickly losing its reputation as a focal point of business and entertainment in the region. The development of highways over the past several years made commuting to downtown much easier than before. Further, Detroit's lack of a commuter rail system effectively forced a vast residential spread of the city's workers into the suburbs. White-collar office workers drove into work in the morning and escaped to their suburban enclaves in the evening. The city's inadequate transit system also prevented residents from easily accessing downtown shopping districts, which contributed to the rise of suburban malls and shopping centers.<sup>9</sup> After witnessing the

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<sup>9</sup> June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 66.

slow decline of downtown Detroit, Cavanagh and other civic leaders sought an opportunity to bring consumers back to downtown.

Placing a new, modern stadium alongside the central business district could have signified Detroit's reemergence as a great, cosmopolitan urban center. Rust belt cities like Detroit faced an image problem in the 1960s. Crime was on the rise, urban riots were becoming commonplace on the national news—the Detroit riot in July 1967 was the most deadly and destructive of all urban riots during the decade—and jobs and residents were moving outside central cities at an unprecedented pace. Civic leaders in traditionally industrial cities like Detroit believed that a modern sport stadium would serve as a symbol of their city's modernity and progressivism.<sup>10</sup> Leaders in Philadelphia replaced decaying Shibe Park with Veterans Stadium in 1971 while civic elites in Pittsburgh succeeded in building Three Rivers Stadium in 1970 to demonstrate the city's post-industrial modernism.<sup>11</sup> Like the proposed riverfront stadium in Detroit, Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium was constructed along the downtown riverfront, and Pittsburgh's civic leaders hoped the modern stadium would be part of a redevelopment plan that would transform the Steel City into a "Renaissance City."<sup>12</sup> A new and technologically-advanced stadium at the Fairgrounds may have achieved a similar purpose, but it would have been on the outskirts of the city, and Romney probably would have received the credit. Cavanagh, though, likely would have been front-and-center at

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<sup>10</sup> Chad Seifried and Donna Pastore, "This Stadium Looks and Tastes Just Like the Others: Cookie-Cutter-Era Sports Facilities from 1953-1991," *Sport History Review* 40 (2008), 43-4; Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*.

<sup>11</sup> Kuklick, *To Every Thing a Season*; Seifried and Pastore, "Cookie-Cutter-Era Sports Facilities," 43.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Kneeland, "Pittsburgh: A Brawny City Puts on a Silk Shirt," *The New York Times*, 3 Oct 1970.

opening ceremonies for a downtown stadium. A downtown stadium also could have projected a sense of unity among Detroiters that a facility on the outskirts of the city could not.

Cavanagh's preference for a downtown stadium conflicted with the advice of his own stadium consultants. In July 1967, the Mayor's stadium committee recommended that a domed stadium be constructed on the site of the Michigan State Fairgrounds. That his self-appointed committee recommended an alternate site demonstrated the economic and logistical advantages of the Fairgrounds location and indicated potential political and personal motives for the mayor's support for the downtown stadium. One of the most important advantages of a Fairgrounds stadium was the anticipated financial support from the state legislature. Since the Fairgrounds were state-owned property, state officials and Governor Romney would have provided some of the funding for the facility.<sup>13</sup> Also, the committee presumed that a stadium authority would acquire the land from the state at no cost since it would be used for a public purpose and thereby increase the value of the Fairgrounds property.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the mayor's committee also recommended that construction start soon, as the state's Department of Agriculture and the State Fair Authority were already in the midst of plans to renovate the Fairgrounds. The stadium could be a centerpiece in the revitalization of the entire area.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the potential of acquiring the land at no cost, building a civic stadium at the Fairgrounds had several other possible benefits. First, it was a preferable

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<sup>13</sup> Report of Mayor's Stadium Committee, July 1967, Library of Michigan, Lansing, MI, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

stadium location because of its proximity to millions of Michigan residents. Located on the northern edge of Detroit, it was the approximate population center for the Detroit metropolitan area. The site was adjacent to the Grand Trunk Railroad, making passenger rail service to and from the stadium a distinct possibility, and it was in close proximity to Interstate 75, the proposed Interstate 696 freeway, and was at the intersection of Eight Mile Road and Woodward Avenue, two of Detroit's major traffic arteries. Easy access to the Fairgrounds coupled with the presence of a modern, domed stadium would enable the State Fair Authority to achieve its goal of developing the Fairgrounds site into a sports and entertainment center for the entire region. The mayor's committee stated that building a stadium at the Fairgrounds would bring so many obvious economic and developmental benefits that the state and city governments would be eager to give their support to such a project.<sup>16</sup>

Conversely, the report of the mayor's committee found several significant problems or potential issues with a downtown stadium site, despite some clear advantages over the Fairgrounds. A downtown stadium would have certainly benefited from beautiful scenery along the Detroit River and would have allowed downtown workers to easily attend stadium events, but acquiring the necessary land to build a stadium immediately east of the Civic Center along the riverfront would have cost between twelve and fourteen million dollars, whereas the Fairgrounds land could be acquired for free. Land to the west of the Civic Center also would have been expensive and would have prevented the city from bringing in potential property tax revenues if that land were used for private development. Although several freeways could have provided

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<sup>16</sup> Report of Mayor's Stadium Committee, July 1967.

easy access to a downtown stadium, the committee warned that major traffic issues could arise during the summer months and around the Detroit-Windsor tunnel. Overall, the drawbacks of a downtown facility led the committee to recommend the Fairgrounds as the future home of Detroit's domed stadium.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his own committee's recommendations in July 1967 for a Fairgrounds stadium, Cavanagh remained convinced that a downtown stadium would generate higher revenues and would better serve residents of Detroit and the surrounding area. Governor Romney, however, still preferred the Fairgrounds site. Cavanagh wanted support from the state government in building the stadium, but he hoped Romney would change course and push for a downtown facility. Nevertheless, Cavanagh took his committee's advice and agreed to ask the Michigan State Legislature to create a stadium authority which would be responsible for developing a financing plan for a civic stadium at the Fairgrounds.<sup>18</sup> Cavanagh also commended his stadium committee for its hard work and agreed with their findings that a new stadium would be "a progressive forward step for the city."<sup>19</sup>

The committee also offered its assessment of potential revenues and expenses of a domed stadium at the Fairgrounds. To build a domed stadium suitable for professional baseball and football, the estimated total cost was \$54.5 million, more than ten million dollars less than building the same stadium downtown. This total cost factored in the stadium, the dome, parking facilities, and infrastructure improvements in the area

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Draft of DSWG Special Report, 25 Jan 1971, DEDC Collection, Box 1 Folder 12.

<sup>19</sup> Radio-TV Statement, Mayor Cavanagh, 13 July 1967, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 372 Folder 16.

surrounding the stadium. The committee expected a net profit of nearly two million dollars per year, although optimistic estimates placed annual profits at \$2.3 million.<sup>20</sup>

### **1967 Riot Temporarily Delays Stadium Planning**

Just days after the mayor's stadium committee issued its report, however, one of the most destructive urban riots of the twentieth century broke out on Detroit's near west side. Police raided an illegal liquor establishment—commonly referred to as a “blind pig”—at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Clairmount Avenue early in the morning on July 23, 1967, and arrested dozens of people, mostly African Americans. Initially, the police tried to take the arrestees out of the back entrance to the building and into the alley, where other citizens were less likely to see the commotion and interfere. But the back door to the building was locked, and they had no choice but to exit through the front in full view of neighborhood residents.<sup>21</sup> Black Detroiters had a strained relationship with the Detroit Police Department dating back several decades, and those citizens who witnessed the police raid viewed it as another example of police brutality. Some jeered the police while others took physical action and threw rocks and bottles at the police cars parked along the street.<sup>22</sup>

For the next several days, the Twelfth Street neighborhood where the riot began resembled a war zone as rioters looted local businesses, set buildings ablaze, and turned cars upside down in the streets. The Detroit Police Department was badly outnumbered and needed state and federal assistance to stop the destruction. As the city burned,

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<sup>20</sup> Report of Mayor's Stadium Committee, July 1967.

<sup>21</sup> Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 156-9.

<sup>22</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 160-3; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 259-60.



Cavanagh asked Governor Romney to call in the State Police and Michigan National Guard. Cavanagh was reluctant to ask for Romney's help because of their fractured relationship. He hoped that a policy of restraint would prevent the situation from becoming even worse, but the dire circumstances forced Cavanagh to seek state and national assistance.<sup>23</sup> By the time the riot ended, 2,509 buildings were burned, and forty-three people were dead, including thirty killed by law enforcement personnel.<sup>24</sup>

Stadium plans were put on hold in the immediate aftermath of the riot. Mayor Cavanagh, Governor Romney, business leaders, and local politicians focused nearly all their attention on restoring peace, rebuilding the riot-torn areas, prosecuting participants in the uprising, and restoring Detroit's national image. Any discussion of stadium plans among politicians or city leaders would have been ignored and likely would have angered Detroiters who wanted all available city and state resources to be devoted to riot recovery efforts. Ultimately, the July riot set back stadium plans by at least six months, and even when Cavanagh, Ford, Fetzer, and other stadium proponents renewed their discussions, the economic and political climate in Detroit had changed so much that the construction of a civic stadium lost much of its support among the populace for a significant period of time.<sup>25</sup>

As destructive as the riot was, and as much bad publicity and embarrassment as it brought the city, it led to a temporary suspension of stadium development talks. But Cavanagh, Ford, Fetzer, and the other major participants in the planning of the stadium

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<sup>23</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 170-72.

<sup>24</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 297-301; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 259.

<sup>25</sup> This became especially important by the early 1970s as stadium plans reached their final stages and civic opposition to the downtown project grew louder and more organized.

resumed their discussions by early 1968. The riot-torn areas of the city still bore the scars of those fateful days in late July, but many city leaders asserted that developing a plan for redevelopment throughout the entire city—not just in the areas destroyed by the riot—would help Detroit restore its image as an industrial center and a major American metropolis. William Clay Ford was perhaps the most eager to renew negotiations on the multi-purpose stadium because of his growing antipathy toward Tiger Stadium. In early January 1968, Ford reminded Cavanagh that the mayor had expressed a willingness to introduce a bill in the state legislature to establish a stadium authority. The establishment of an authority, in Ford's estimation, would have accelerated the development of land acquisition, financing, and construction of a new facility. Ford pressed Cavanagh to follow through on this promise and assured him that everyone in the Lions organization was "delighted that you are willing to introduce such a bill in the '68 session with the hope it might start things rolling."<sup>26</sup>

### **Ford's Frustration Continues; Lions Issue Their Own Stadium Study**

Ford relied on Cavanagh to do his part in finally bringing the stadium plan to fruition. He knew, however, that he needed to maintain pressure on city leaders and keep the project in the public eye. Shortly after he lobbied for Cavanagh to call for a stadium bill in the legislature, the Detroit Lions issued their own stadium study, independent of the Mayor's Stadium Committee report just six months earlier. The Lions' report, released in January 1968, illustrated a preliminary overall plan for the planning, financing, and construction of a new Detroit stadium. Ford and others in the Lions' front

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from William Clay Ford to Cavanagh, 3 January 1968, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 457 Folder 13.

office grew increasingly frustrated throughout the mid-1960s over the slow course of discussions regarding the new facility. Therefore, the organization took matters into its own hands and issued its own recommendations for completing the long-discussed project.

The Lions' study is particularly notable for its comprehensive analysis of recently built stadiums throughout the United States and those which were currently in the planning or construction stages. Several other cities were shelling out public dollars for stadium construction, either to keep their teams and maintain their big league status or to serve notice that they had a suitable home for a professional team. The Lions' research department examined the design, financing, location, and revenues of each facility to determine the feasibility of a similar type of stadium within the Detroit metropolitan area. D.C. Stadium, in Washington, had inadequate locker rooms and press facilities, and the Senators baseball team had offices within the stadium while the Redskins football team had no such space of their own.<sup>27</sup> San Diego Stadium, built for the NFL's Chargers and minor league baseball's Padres, was paid for through a bond sale and was backed by the credit of the city. San Diego Stadium was also designed with equal consideration given to football and baseball, and much of its construction and financing were examples Ford hoped to emulate in Detroit. The Lions' study also referenced multi-purpose stadiums in the planning stages in Boston, Cincinnati, and Kansas City.

But the team's researchers were most fascinated with and impressed by the Houston Astrodome, calling it "The Taj Mahal of All Stadia." Total construction costs

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<sup>27</sup> Detroit Lions, Inc. "A study relating to the proposed construction of a multi-purpose stadium for the Wayne, Macomb, Oakland Tri-County area and Detroit, Michigan," (Detroit, MI, 1968).

for the Astrodome were just over \$45 million and, according to the Lions' study, the stadium shined "like a precious jewel in southwest Houston, Texas."<sup>28</sup> Despite such hyperbole, however, William Clay Ford did not want to simply build a replica of the Astrodome in Detroit. The Lions' report expressed admiration for the architectural and engineering feats which went into the construction of the Astrodome and recommended the use of an Astroturf field in the new Detroit stadium, but Ford wanted to avoid the circular playing field of most of the recently built stadiums, including the Astrodome. Instead, the Lions recommended a horseshoe shaped stadium "which would allow spectators of both baseball and football to have an unobstructed view of the entire playing field."<sup>29</sup> The Lions' researchers argued that such a design would provide more premium seats around the infield for baseball games and along the sidelines for football. The report also claimed that the horseshoe design would result in a baseball seating capacity of 50,000, which Tigers owner John Fetzer wanted, and 70,000 capacity for football, one of Ford's primary demands.<sup>30</sup>

As Ford and others in the Lions organization tried to push the project forward, they expressed their exasperation over the city's slow progress on the stadium issue. One reason the Lions wanted to hurry the process along was because of the team's claim that Tiger Stadium was deteriorating and was inadequate as a professional football facility. Also, construction costs in Detroit and throughout the country had steadily increased as discussions between team officials and city leaders developed. Not only was the delay

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

preventing Ford from moving his team to a better facility, but it was also costing more money as discussions dragged on. Because of Ford's frustration over the lack of progress, the Lions claimed that no consideration should be given to the staging of the Olympics in the design of the new facility. Ford asserted that Detroit's Olympic quest had delayed stadium construction for long enough, since most members of the Detroit Olympic Committee wanted to wait until the IOC awarded the Games to Detroit before pressing forward with stadium planning.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the Lions' recommendation of a horseshoe design ignored any requirements for possible track and field events. Primary considerations should have been given to hosting baseball and football games and, according to the Lions' study, "if Detroit is to build an Olympic-type stadium this situation should be resolved when, as and if the City of Detroit is awarded the Olympic Games."<sup>32</sup>

### **Fairgrounds Keeps Fighting But Local Press Favors Downtown**

By mid-1968, stadium plans progressed as Ford had hoped, although officials still had made no definite decisions on the location or financing. In early July, a group of representatives from the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, the City Plan Commission, and the Department of Industrial and Commercial Development met with architects from Smith, Hinchmann, and Grylls, to determine the feasibility of building a stadium downtown near the central business district. Thomas Ashcraft, director of Industrial and Commercial Development with the city of Detroit and a representative of

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<sup>31</sup> Many DOC members had given up on the Olympic dream by 1968, having been denied the 1972 Games. The stadium plan, at that point, had become a professional sports endeavor rather than an Olympic one.

<sup>32</sup> Detroit Lions' Stadium Study, January 1968.

the Chamber of Commerce, recognized that a feasibility study had already been created the year before by the Mayor's Stadium Committee. Ashcraft noted that the Mayor's Committee report recommended building the stadium on the State Fairgrounds site, but he also acknowledged that the Fairgrounds location seemed to have little support among civic and business leaders in Detroit.<sup>33</sup> Much of the support among political and business elites for a Fairgrounds stadium came from George Romney and others in Lansing.

Building the stadium downtown rather than at the Fairgrounds was a popular idea among many ordinary Detroiters. One citizen wrote to Cavanagh that a downtown stadium would "produce a 'hot spot' bringing spenders to a new neighborhood," and that same citizen predicted that residents throughout Michigan and out of state would be more likely to attend events at a downtown stadium where they could take advantage of other entertainment opportunities in the neighborhood.<sup>34</sup> According to a 1970 report by the Downtown Stadium Working Group, a local market research company conducted a survey of more than one thousand attendees at Detroit Tigers games during July and August 1969 asking where they wanted a new stadium located. Nearly fifty-five percent preferred a downtown stadium site while just ten percent favored the Fairgrounds. The rest of the respondents felt a suburban site would be best while roughly half of the survey's suburban respondents wanted a stadium in the suburbs. That same survey found

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<sup>33</sup> Stadium Feasibility Discussions between the Department of Industrial and Commercial Development, the City Plan Commission, the Greater Detroit Board of Commerce, Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, and Community Renewal (CRP), 11 July 1968, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 457 Folder 13.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Alfred H. Whittaker, M.D., to Cavanagh, 7 November 1968, Jerome Cavanagh Collection, Box 457 Folder 13.

that more than eighty percent of Detroit residents wanted the stadium to be built downtown.<sup>35</sup>

Planning and building a civic stadium in Detroit required cooperation within various levels of government and among local business leaders. No stadium would ever be built in Detroit if interested parties could not work together to achieve the final goal. Throughout most of the 1960s, Detroit's stadium organizers tried to work through a disruptive and combative political relationship between Governor Romney and Mayor Cavanagh. Romney, a Republican, wanted a stadium at the State Fairgrounds, and he hoped it would be part of his legacy as governor. Cavanagh, meanwhile, sought a downtown stadium as a crowning achievement for his Democratic administration and resisted efforts among state Republicans to steer the stadium discussions back toward the State Fairgrounds. In late October 1968, Cavanagh was absent at a scheduled meeting with Romney to discuss the progress of the stadium plans. Romney was reportedly furious and accused Cavanagh of purposely skipping the meeting to undermine Romney and the Republican Party.<sup>36</sup> Afterwards, Alfred Glancy, Jr., chairman of the development committee for the Michigan State Fair Authority and a close political acquaintance of Romney, sarcastically advised Cavanagh to look at his own Mayor's Stadium Committee report from July 1967, which warned that land costs for a downtown stadium would likely be too high.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> DSWG Report: "A Multi-Purpose Domed Stadium for Detroit, Michigan at the Cobo Hall West Site," 20 March 1970.

<sup>36</sup> "Cavanagh Stands Up Angry Romney," *Detroit Free Press*, 25 October 1968.

<sup>37</sup> "Cavanagh Stands Up Angry Romney," *Detroit Free Press*, 25 October 1968.

Cavanagh, however, maintained his support and preference for a downtown civic stadium. The most suitable downtown location, in his estimation, was west of Cobo Hall, just a short walk from the central business district. The *Detroit News* reported that Cavanagh was “negotiating furiously to engineer a complicated land swap that could lead eventually to full development of riverfront property that now sits idle and is owned by the Penn Central Railroad.”<sup>38</sup> Cavanagh argued that the downtown stadium would benefit from hotels, restaurants, and other entertainment options in the surrounding area and that it would evoke a greater level of civic pride than a stadium on the outskirts of the city. Perhaps to appease Romney and save some political goodwill, Cavanagh reassured citizens that if developers determined that the stadium could not be built downtown, he would be “all for the Fairgrounds site.”<sup>39</sup>

One of Cavanagh’s most important allies in his push for a downtown stadium was the mainstream press. The *Detroit Free Press* issued several editorials throughout 1968 calling for a downtown stadium as part of a grand riverfront development plan. The newspaper claimed that the downtown riverfront was the city’s “greatest asset” and a downtown stadium could bring millions of people downtown on a yearly basis. The editorial also noted that all major expressway projects would be completed by 1970, providing smooth access to and from downtown. In comparison, “anyone who has rassed state fair traffic on Eight Mile and on Woodward” would surely prefer a

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<sup>38</sup> “What Stadium Squabble is About, by Robert A. Popa, *Detroit News*, 27 October 1968.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



downtown facility over the Fair Grounds.<sup>40</sup> The *Free Press* used the publicity from Tigers' appearance in the 1968 World Series to demonstrate the city's need for a new baseball stadium. The paper described fifty-six year-old Tiger Stadium as a "garish green-and-gray ball park" which "looked like a bride that was left at the altar for two generations."<sup>41</sup> If citizens were unsure of the need for a new stadium, editors at the *Free Press* tried to paint vivid imagery of a decaying, outdated, embarrassment of a ballpark as an appeal to the civic pride of Detroiters.

### **Suburbs Join the Stadium Debate**

But the Fairgrounds and downtown sites were not the only areas being considered as potential locations for a new multi-purpose stadium. Several suburban municipalities were developing their own proposals to be pitched to William Clay Ford and John Fetzer. The suburban population of the Detroit metropolitan area was growing quickly as residents followed jobs and housing outside the central city. Detroit's population declined from 1.67 million in 1960 to around 1.5 million by 1970.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the total combined population of suburban Oakland and Macomb counties was about 1.53 million by 1970.<sup>43</sup> As a result, suburban leaders gained political power and grew confident that their cities could bring urban cultural institutions like the Tigers and Lions out of Detroit. Walled Lake, a northwest suburb in Oakland County, was preparing preliminary stadium

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<sup>40</sup> "A New Detroit Stadium for 1970's World Series," Detroit Free Press, 11 September 1968.

<sup>41</sup> "Series Shows Need for New Stadium," Detroit News, 9 October 1968.

<sup>42</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Population of States and Counties of the United States, 1790 to 1990*, accessed June 11, 2015, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/pop1790-1990.html>.

studies throughout 1968.<sup>44</sup> Walled Lake had only a few thousand residents, but it was surrounded by larger suburbs such as Novi and Farmington Hills, and Oakland County had a total population of nearly 900,000 in 1968. Discussions among suburban leaders grew to the extent that Detroit's press picked up on the risk of losing two of the city's four major sports teams, considering in February 1969 the possibility of "The Walled Lake Tigers? The Pontiac Lions? Ridiculous—but it could happen."<sup>45</sup>

The most aggressive suburb throughout the stadium debate of the late 1960s was undoubtedly Pontiac. For much of the decade, Pontiac's leaders supported the idea of building a stadium at the Fairgrounds. The site was much closer to Pontiac than the proposed downtown location, and the Fairgrounds were near the population center of the metropolitan area. Few suburbs, including Pontiac, had any illusions of building their own stadium to draw the Tigers or Lions away from Detroit. A 1964 editorial in *The Pontiac Press* supported plans to build a stadium at the Fairgrounds and made no appeals to Pontiac leaders for a suburban stadium. The editorial asserted that "people from Oakland and Macomb Counties, Flint, Lansing, Saginaw, Bay City, Ann Arbor and many, many other cities would find attendance possible on reasonable time schedules" if traveling to the Fairgrounds rather than downtown.<sup>46</sup>

As Detroit's suburbs grew larger and became more important to the political and economic strength of the region, however, suburban leaders tried to bring their respective towns outside the shadow of the central city. By 1968, Pontiac officials had developed a

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<sup>44</sup> "Walled Lake has turn at bat for new stadium," *Detroit News*, 19 September 1968.

<sup>45</sup> "Lions, Tigers to Leave Detroit? It Could Happen!" *Detroit News*, 27 February 1969.

<sup>46</sup> "Increased Athletics Interest Requires Better Facilities," *The Pontiac Press*, by Harold A. Fitzgerald, 30 November 1964.

redevelopment plan and were determining how a civic stadium would fit within that plan. In September of that year, Pontiac leaders met with members of the Metropolitan Stadium Committee, a group which was looking throughout the region for the best possible site for a stadium, not just within Detroit's city limits. Pontiac representatives "spared no expense or preparation to dazzle" the stadium committee, hoping that the approval of the committee would be the next logical step in bringing the Lions and/or the Tigers to Pontiac.<sup>47</sup>

Stadium planners dealt with significantly different economic and political circumstances in the 1960s compared to earlier decades. Rapid suburbanization in many metropolitan areas forced city leaders to find ways to maintain the cultural and economic relevance of the central city. Mayors, city councils, and business elites throughout the country created urban development projects to entice current residents to stay and to lure suburbanites back to the city, if not permanently then at least for shopping and entertainment. But stadium developers and boosters often failed to understand that they needed to create a facility which would bring in revenues from outside the metropolitan area. As historian Robert Trumpbour argues, "Bringing in dollars from the metropolitan area itself is not typically sufficient to bring substantial growth because such dollars, if not spent on sports, would be spent in other ways within the community."<sup>48</sup> Stadiums needed to bring in new revenues to a region, not just shift where existing citizens spent their entertainment dollars, in order to justify the millions of dollars in local funds spent on such projects. None of the major individuals involved in the stadium project

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<sup>47</sup> "Pontiac Impresses Stadium Site Group," *Detroit News*, 12 September 1968.

<sup>48</sup> Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 40.

considered this reality, at least publicly, however, little research had been done in the late 1960s on the effect of sport stadiums on local economies.<sup>49</sup>

### **Boosterism and the Stadium Boom**

Few civic leaders during the 1960s seemed to understand or care about the true economic costs and benefits, and stadium construction proceeded in several major cities throughout the decade despite the questionable economic returns. Meanwhile, boosters continued to emphasize—or exaggerate—the benefits of new stadiums to the urban economy. In Pittsburgh, proponents argued that the new stadium would bring jobs and revenues to the entire community, particularly the neighborhood surrounding the stadium. After Three Rivers Stadium opened in 1970, however, Pittsburgh’s economy continued its decline well into the 1980s. The projected development around the stadium simply never happened.<sup>50</sup> One journalist in Cincinnati described Riverfront Stadium as “a crown for the Queen City” soon after its opening in 1970, although its artificial turf and circular, modernist design turned the stadium into a symbol of obsolescence less than twenty years after being built.<sup>51</sup> Boosterism in St. Louis throughout the early 1960s led to the construction of Busch Stadium, which served as an antithesis of aging Tiger Stadium during the battle between the Cardinals and Tigers in the 1968 World Series.

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<sup>49</sup> This was more common beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. See George Lipsitz, “Sports Stadia and Urban Development: A Tale of Three Cities,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (1984), 1-18; R. Eckstein and K. Delaney, “New Sports Stadiums, Community Self-Esteem, and Community Collective Conscience,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. (Aug. 2002), 236-248; Robert Baade, *Stadiums, Professional Sports, and Economic Development: Assessing the Reality* (Chicago: Heartland Institute, 1994); James Quirk and Rodney Fort, *Pay Dirt: The Business of Professional Team Sports* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 143.

<sup>51</sup> Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 82.

The modern look of Busch Stadium gave stadium proponents in Detroit additional ammunition in their campaign for a new sports facility. A *Detroit Free Press* editorial during the World Series declared that Busch Stadium “is to Tiger Stadium what Washington Boulevard [in downtown Detroit] is to 12th Street [site of the 1967 riot].”<sup>52</sup>

As stadiums in various cities throughout the country were completed or neared completion, politicians in other cities became increasingly interested in having such a cultural and economic symbol for their respective cities. New sport facilities became an important element of a city’s “major league” status and a vital component of modern civic infrastructure. Mayors, council members, and local elites were eager to leave their marks on their hometowns through a massive, magnificent stadium. Convincing the public to accept the use of municipal resources was perhaps the most important task of stadium supporters. If citizens refused to support such a project, politicians certainly would not risk backlash from their constituents, and the stadium would never reach the construction stage. Therefore, local media played a central role in the stadium boom of the 1960s. Stadium supporters needed positive coverage in local newspapers and on local television stations to convince taxpayers that spending millions of dollars on a sport facility was in the best interest of the city and its residents. Many local media outlets supported the construction of new stadiums and the use of public funds.

Despite occasional articles that called attention to the misuse of public funds or raised debate over whether money should be spent on sport facilities when cities had so many more pressing issues, local media typically created or reinforced a positive public portrayal of stadium planning and public funding. One reason for this is rather simple. A

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<sup>52</sup> “Series Shows Need for New Stadium,” *Detroit News*, 9 October 1968.

new stadium was a major news story which created business for newspapers and television stations. Moreover, building a new facility guaranteed that local professional teams would remain in the area for the foreseeable future, which was also good business for publishers. Newspaper publishers in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and several other cities either provided funds for stadium lobbyists or served as lobbyists themselves to put pressure on local politicians to vote in favor of stadium proposals.<sup>53</sup>

Such support for new stadiums among newspaper publishers placed significant pressure on journalists to skew their editorials in favor of new facilities for local professional teams. Columnists and reporters might have jeopardized their own job security if they strayed too far from the company's established line. The construction of a new stadium was often among the most popular local topics within several cities throughout the decade, and most citizens had strong opinions on one side or the other. In Cincinnati, the local press strongly supported the campaign to replace aging Crosley Field during the 1960s. As early as the late 1950s, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* implored citizens to support stadium construction as a way to maintain the city's national prestige.<sup>54</sup> Local stadium interests in Minneapolis-St. Paul went as far as censoring the press to maintain positive media coverage. John Cowles, Sr., owner of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, was a firm supporter of the plan to renovate Metropolitan Stadium in order to lure the Washington Senators baseball team to the Twin Cities. In 1958, a reporter for the *Tribune* wrote a story detailing the public's liability for financing the stadium. The paper's editors killed the story before it could be published because it likely would have

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<sup>53</sup> deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*, 111.

<sup>54</sup> Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 76.

destroyed public support for the renovation and prevented the city from achieving “major league” status.<sup>55</sup>

If Cavanagh and the downtown stadium supporters felt they needed to convince the public to accept such an expensive project, they had the firm backing of Detroit’s major newspapers. Throughout 1968 and 1969, both the *Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News* published numerous news articles and editorials which nearly all celebrated a potential downtown, multi-purpose stadium. A September 1968 *Free Press* editorial claimed, “Downtown Detroit must be rebuilt. It has been, and will continue to be, a difficult grind. But Tiger Stadium is still Bennett Park, 1900. This too must change.”<sup>56</sup> Not only would a new stadium revive downtown, according to the *Free Press*, but it would allow the Tigers to move out of Tiger Stadium, which some Detroiters were increasingly viewing as a relic.

### **Franchise Relocation and Its Effect on Stadium Construction**

Most team owners counted on the support of the press and mass media because of the opportunity for a major, ongoing story, but a significant factor in the media’s acquiescence regarding new stadium construction was the limited number of professional franchises in each major league. Even with somewhat rapid expansion in each league throughout the 1960s, the total number of professional teams in the United States was still limited and led to competition between cities to maintain or achieve major league status. In 1960, baseball’s American and National leagues had a total of sixteen teams,

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<sup>55</sup> Jay Weiner, *Stadium Games: Fifty Years of Big League Greed and Bush-League Boondoggles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 34-5.

<sup>56</sup> Bennett Park was the name of the wooden ballpark in which the Tigers played from 1896 until 1912, when Navin Field opened on the same site; “A New Detroit Stadium for 1970’s World Series,” *Detroit Free Press*, 11 Sept 1968.

the National Football League had thirteen, the National Basketball Association eight, and the National Hockey League a mere six. This changed within ten years. All four major sports leagues added new franchises during the 1960s. By 1970, Major League Baseball had twenty-four teams, the NFL increased to twenty-three, the NBA more than doubled to seventeen, and the NHL increased to a total fourteen franchises.<sup>57</sup> Still, such a small number of teams led to competition between cities to host professional sports franchises.

Franchise relocation took place in the 1960s on a level not seen during the first half of the twentieth century. Teams sometimes switched cities in the early years of each league's existence, but once leagues were on firm financial footing, they usually maintained a stable group of host cities. From 1903 to 1953, no major league baseball teams changed cities.<sup>58</sup> Once the Boston Braves moved west to Milwaukee, though, the floodgates opened, and several team owners searched for greener pastures in other cities. The Brooklyn Dodgers, New York Giants, Philadelphia Athletics, and St. Louis Browns moved to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Kansas City, and Baltimore, respectively, during the 1950s. In the 1960s, the Washington Senators headed west to Minneapolis-St. Paul, and the Milwaukee Braves relocated again, this time to Atlanta. Five NBA teams changed cities during the decade (Minneapolis Lakers to Los Angeles, Philadelphia Warriors to San Francisco, Syracuse Nationals to Philadelphia 76ers, Chicago Zephyrs to Baltimore Bullets, and St. Louis Hawks to Atlanta), and although no NFL teams

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<sup>57</sup> Neil Longley, *An Absence of Competition: The Sustained Competitive Advantage of the Monopoly Sports Leagues* (New York: Springer, 2013), 18.

<sup>58</sup> G. Edward White, *Creating the National Pastime: Baseball Transforms Itself, 1903-1953* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).



relocated during this period, several threatened to move to suburban locations in hopes of gaining a new, modern football stadium.

This mobility transformed professional sport. Within such a competitive atmosphere and restricted market for professional teams, franchise owners understood that they could threaten to move in order to pressure politicians and citizens to support the construction of new stadiums at public expense.<sup>59</sup> If a team left town, a city could not easily replace it with a new professional team. This placed much of the bargaining power in the hands of team owners and league executives. Owners of the Milwaukee Braves, led by Chicago-based investor William Bartholomay, used their leverage to demand significant subsidies from the local government to keep them from following through on threats to move the team to Atlanta. Congressman Henry Reuss complained that franchise owners like the Braves “enter a new community, catch all the fish, cut down all the trees, mine all the minerals and then leave it high and dry.”<sup>60</sup> After extracting all possible concessions from Atlanta and Milwaukee, the Bartholomay group ultimately moved the Braves to Atlanta for the 1966 season. Not all team owners used such heavy-handed tactics, though. The Dodgers moved to Los Angeles after the city offered team owner Walter O’Malley available land at Chavez Ravine for stadium construction, but historian Neil Sullivan argues that O’Malley did not use the competition between Brooklyn and Los Angeles to his advantage. Rather, O’Malley benefited from a strong

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<sup>59</sup> For an analysis of stadium blackmail by owners during the 1990s, see deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*, 67-73.

<sup>60</sup> Glen Gendzel, “Competitive Boosterism: How Milwaukee Lost the Braves,” *The Business History Review*, 561.

desire among Los Angeles leaders and citizens to bring a major league team to California.<sup>61</sup>

William Clay Ford understood this. The power he held as owner of the Detroit Lions was significant. His team had played in Detroit for more than thirty years and, with the huge rise in popularity of professional football in the 1960s, had established itself as an important fixture within Detroit's culture. As early as 1964, Ford lobbied Mayor Jerome Cavanagh for a new football stadium, explaining that "the sports fans in Michigan are entitled to the best and would definitely support any move on your part which would make the construction of a modern stadium a reality within the next several years."<sup>62</sup> One year later, Lions vice president Edwin Anderson wrote to Cavanagh to call attention to the approval of a stadium bond issue in San Diego. Anderson also pointed out that "the San Diego Chargers [NFL team] had threatened to move to Anaheim, California if the voters did not pass the Bond Issue."<sup>63</sup> This could have been a subtle threat of relocation on Anderson's part or it may have been a reminder that the Lions had made no such threats to that point and were operating in good faith with the city. By the late 1960s, though, Ford's gentle prodding turned into frustration and threats to move his team out of Detroit. As various suburbs developed proposals to build a professional football stadium, Ford publicly expressed his interest in those proposals and entertained the possibility of moving his team.

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<sup>61</sup> Neil Sullivan, *The Dodgers Move West*, 216.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from William Clay Ford to Jerome Cavanagh, 23 November 1964, Jerome Cavanagh Papers, Box 169 Folder 20.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Edwin Anderson, VP and GM of Detroit Lions, to Cavanagh, 3 November 1965, Jerome Cavanagh Papers, Box 169 Folder 20.

## Professional Sports and Urban Politics

Decisions regarding stadium construction had a significant political element in most cities. Frank Rashid, a founder of the Tiger Stadium Fan Club in 1987, attributed the calls among politicians for new stadiums— rather than renovating existing stadiums—to power politics. Rashid tried to rally public support to renovate Tiger Stadium during the late 1980s and into the 1990s rather than allow city leaders to spend unnecessary dollars on a brand new facility. He asserted that mayors and other political elites “have the ability to say who gets the contracts, whose land is used, which developers are employed, which bond attorneys do it—and all of those people are the people who contribute to their campaign war chests.”<sup>64</sup> Mayors and governors typically supported large-scale stadium projects because they enjoyed much of the resulting publicity while city councils and state legislatures often resisted spending massive amounts of dollars on stadiums. This was not surprising since they rarely benefited personally or politically from such ventures.<sup>65</sup>

But even those political leaders who supported stadium construction varied in their desires to see such a project completed under their watch. Norris Poulson, mayor of Los Angeles when the Brooklyn Dodgers moved into town, certainly wanted a major league baseball team but, more importantly, wanted a successful franchise. Poulson had opportunities to make offers to the St. Louis Browns and Washington Senators, but he was not interested in those teams. They routinely finished near the bottom of the league

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<sup>64</sup> Neil deMause and Joanna Cagan, *Field of Schemes: How the Great Stadium Swindle Turns Public Money Into Private Profit*, 103-4.

<sup>65</sup> deMause and Cagan, *Field of Schemes*, 104.

standings.<sup>66</sup> He did not want a loser. In his negotiations with Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley, he faced opposition from some members of the city council who were more concerned with preventing misuse of taxpayer funds than in bringing a major league baseball team to Los Angeles.<sup>67</sup>

Cavanagh changed course throughout his tenure as mayor. When he took office in 1961, the Detroit Olympic Committee was hard at work to bring the Olympic Games to the city. If the IOC awarded the Olympics to Detroit, a publicly-funded stadium would have been built. Cavanagh fully supported this plan and claimed that hosting the Olympics would benefit Detroit's international image and its economy. After the 1963 vote for the 1968 Games went to Mexico City, though, Cavanagh backed away from the idea of a municipal stadium. On several occasions, Cavanagh informed Governor Romney that if the state government wanted to provide funds to build a facility on the State Fairgrounds site, they should not expect any monetary support from the city of Detroit. Later in the decade, though, Cavanagh emphasized the need for a modern, multi-purpose stadium on Detroit's downtown riverfront.

By the end of the 1960s, plans for a municipal stadium seemed to be making steady progress. In April 1969, Michigan's state legislature authorized the creation of a stadium authority to plan and construct a new baseball-football stadium for the Detroit metro area, either within Detroit's city limits or in the surrounding suburbs, although many state-level politicians still preferred the State Fairgrounds location. House Bill 2020 created a stadium authority, consisting of three members appointed by the governor.

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<sup>66</sup> Sullivan, *The Dodgers Move West*, 88.

<sup>67</sup> Sullivan, *The Dodgers Move West*, 100-1.

The authority's responsibilities were to plan and construct a stadium, issue revenue bonds secured by revenues of the stadium, and lease the facility to private enterprises.<sup>68</sup> The legislature hoped that a new stadium could bring economic benefits to the Detroit area and symbolize the metropolitan region's continued role as Michigan's economic and industrial leader.

The state legislature's continued support for a municipal stadium gave Detroit's civic leaders additional motivation to press forward with the project. Throughout 1969, the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce was committed to building a new downtown stadium in Detroit. Members of the Chamber agreed that "downtown Detroit offers the most favorable and feasible site for a new baseball-football stadium."<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Chamber members believed that a downtown stadium would benefit not just Detroit, but the entire region. They claimed that such a stadium "will be in the best interests of professional sports, commercial and industrial activity, the revival and development of the inner city, and the general interests of the people of the City of Detroit, southeastern Michigan and the State of Michigan."<sup>70</sup> After deciding to build the new stadium downtown, the Downtown Stadium Working Group (DSWG) took responsibility for developing a stadium plan. The DSWG, a committee of twenty-one civic leaders headed by local advertising executive Thomas Adams, and prominent businessmen Robert Sweany and Michael Cherry, first needed to find a downtown site suitable for a new

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<sup>68</sup> "Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce: 'Comments on House Bills 2020 and 2969, Michigan Legislature, 1969'", 11 April 1969, Box 1, Folder 1, Detroit Economic Development Corporation Collection, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

stadium. After briefly considering other locations throughout the city, they decided to build along the Detroit River in downtown Detroit, in the West Cobo Hall location because it appeared to supply “reasonable solutions to the challenging [sic] opportunities of the downtown stadium complex.” Cherry concluded that the stadium should be domed in order to meet the needs of professional sports franchises, following the contemporary logic that open air stadiums were obsolete and out of place in modern urban America.<sup>71</sup>

### **Conclusion: Stalemate in Detroit Leads Ford to Move Ahead with Pontiac Plan**

As Adams, Cherry, and the rest of the DSWG pressed forward with their plans for the downtown stadium, Lions owner William Clay Ford held discussions with Pontiac city leaders regarding a possible stadium construction plan in Pontiac. Pontiac officials had been pursuing the Lions and Tigers, urging both to relocate to their city since 1968. Ford’s growing frustration with the lack of progress in Detroit gave suburban planners hope that they could entice Ford to move his team out of Detroit. In 1970, Pontiac business leaders, led by C. Don Davidson, a native of Pontiac and an accomplished architect and urban planner, studied possible new developments within their city and created a community revitalization plan, known familiarly as the “Pontiac Plan.” The Pontiac City Commission appointed a stadium authority to determine “the necessary economic feasibility” in constructing a stadium. The study acknowledged that “the City [of Pontiac] has made the major sport teams aware that a stadium can be built and

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<sup>71</sup> “COMAC Company Inter-Office Memorandum from Michael Cherry to Gerald Daugherty,” 23 December 1969, Box 1, Folder 7, DEDC.

financed in Pontiac.”<sup>72</sup> The desire of Pontiac leaders to lure a professional sports franchise provided Ford with additional bargaining power in his discussions with Detroit. Cavanagh and Detroit’s stadium planners made little significant progress on the downtown stadium plan, and Ford realized the potential economic benefits of moving his team outside the central city. The possibility that Detroit could lose its professional sports franchises to the suburbs set the stage for a heated battle between suburban officials, Detroit civic leaders, William Clay Ford, and Detroit Tigers owner John Fetzer over the future of professional sports in Detroit during the early 1970s.

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<sup>72</sup> Bruno Leon, Karl H. Greimel, and C. Don Davidson, “An Environmental Analysis of a Central Business Area: Pontiac, Michigan,” (Detroit: Bruno Leon and Associates, 1970), 54.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “SYMBOLS ARE IMPORTANT”: DETROIT AND ITS SUBURBS COMPETE FOR “BIG LEAGUE” STATUS, 1969-1971

Detroit faced a major image problem by 1969. The 1967 riot showed the entire world how deep the city’s racial and economic divide ran. Deindustrialization, suburbanization, and decades of police brutality toward black Detroiters contributed to what was one of the most destructive urban riots in the history of the United States. Most Detroit residents, especially black Detroiters, knew that their hometown did not deserve its reputation as a racially harmonious city that the national media had bestowed upon it throughout much of the postwar period. In July 1967, that reputation was shattered. Business and civic leaders in the Motor City were compelled to find ways to rebuild the city’s neighborhoods and restore Detroit’s status as one of the premier urban areas in the country.

Like mayors and business elites in many other cities during the 1960s, Detroit’s leaders pressed forward with plans to build a municipal sport stadium in the heart of downtown.<sup>1</sup> The facility was to serve as a civic symbol, a concrete and steel representation of Detroit’s cultural and economic preeminence in Michigan and throughout the Midwest. The new Busch Stadium in downtown St. Louis, which opened in 1966, was the centerpiece of a multi-million dollar urban redevelopment plan for the

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<sup>1</sup> New stadiums built in other cities during this period were not always constructed downtown, but Detroit’s municipal and business leaders viewed the city’s riverfront as such a natural and aesthetic asset that they were intent on locating the new facility downtown.



city's downtown.<sup>2</sup> Mayor Jerome Cavanagh and stadium planners in Detroit hoped that a downtown, riverfront arena would do the same for Detroit's international image. Along those same lines, Cavanagh and company believed the new facility would reinforce the city's "big league" status. Detroit was home to professional franchises in each of the four major sports leagues since the 1930s, but many cities and suburbs throughout the United States without teams of their own were building new facilities to gain big league status for themselves.<sup>3</sup> Most stadium supporters in Detroit understood that if a new stadium was not built, another city could present Tigers owner John Fetzer or Lions owner William Clay Ford with an offer too good to refuse.<sup>4</sup> Detroit risked a severe blow to its cultural status if stadium plans stalled.

The motivation to build a municipal stadium along the downtown riverfront resulted largely from the nation's shift to a service and entertainment economy in the postwar era. Once the "Arsenal of Democracy", Detroit became perhaps the most notable example of a Rust Belt city, a former industrial leader which lost tens of thousands of blue-collar, middle-class jobs during the previous twenty years. In response, civic leaders in Detroit hoped to bring in needed revenue through tourism and entertainment and give cultural meaning and status to the city's downtown. Cavanagh, civic leaders, and the local press envisioned a stadium that would stimulate commercial

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<sup>2</sup> William N. Wallace, "Cards Win as St. Louis Stadium Opens." *New York Times* 13 May 1966, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Seattle was one such city. In 1968, Major League Baseball awarded an expansion franchise to Seattle, and citizens responded by voting for a bond issuance to pay for a new downtown stadium. The Seattle Pilots played one season in the American League before its owner sold the team to a Milwaukee businessman. The team relocated to Wisconsin and changed its name to the Milwaukee Brewers.

<sup>4</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, this type of scenario was realized by Milwaukee's leaders in the mid-1960s as their Braves baseball team relocated to Atlanta to take advantage of a publicly-financed stadium and a larger media market.

development in the area, including hotels, restaurants, retail centers, and office buildings, effectively reversing the effects of suburbanization on downtown.

In addition, they predicted that a vibrant, revitalized downtown would have a positive effect on the entire region. New tax revenue streams from downtown would give city leaders more financial flexibility to help rebuild riot-torn areas, improve the city's roads and infrastructure, and expand the city government's labor force to bring needed city services to all neighborhoods. No one publicly claimed that a downtown stadium could help improve race relations in the city, but some local journalists worried that moving the stadium project outside Detroit could have an adverse effect, as it would lead black Detroiters to believe that stadium planners were simply following white residents to the suburbs. In March 1969, Phillip Power of the *Detroit Free Press*, warned, "Once you start putting up a stadium in one place or another for racial reasons, (veiled racial reasons, but racial reasons all the same) you start breaking down your fans into blacks and whites."<sup>5</sup>

But perhaps the key factor in the push for a downtown stadium and subsequent resistance from William Clay Ford was the gradual suburbanization of the Detroit metropolitan area. As black citizens moved into Detroit by the thousands during and after World War II seeking industrial employment, middle-class whites fled the city for largely segregated suburban neighborhoods. Many of those industrial jobs moved out of Detroit as well, as automation in manufacturing, the rise of the Sun Belt as an industrial region, and the United States' overall shift to a post-industrial, cultural and service economy resulted in the closure of several automotive and manufacturing plants in the

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<sup>5</sup> "Racial Shadow Over the Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 28 March 1969.

city. Detroit lost much of its tax revenue as per capita income declined precipitously within the central city. The Chamber of Commerce, the Common Council, and civic leaders looked for any opportunity to bring consumers and residents back to Detroit. They claimed that a downtown stadium with a burgeoning retail and entertainment district surrounding it would generate revenues far exceeding the costs of construction and operation.

Suburbanites, on the other hand, still supported their local teams but were reluctant to travel to the poverty-stricken inner city, particularly in the wake of the riot. William Clay Ford understood this and felt that a suburban location for a new stadium made more financial sense for his team, since many of his season ticket holders and most loyal customers were already living outside the city limits. Ultimately, he agreed to move the Lions to suburban Pontiac, making what he believed to be a sound business decision. That decision resulted not only from strategic errors on the part of Detroit's stadium planners but also from decades of federal urban policy decisions and structural developments in postwar urban America.

### **1969: The Downtown Stadium Plan Gains Momentum**

Supporters of a downtown, riverfront stadium received a major boost in 1969. When William Milliken was sworn in as governor of Michigan, the Republican replaced George Romney, a frequent adversary of Jerome Cavanagh and a strong proponent of a multi-purpose stadium at the State Fairgrounds on the northern edge of Detroit.<sup>6</sup> Cavanagh looked forward to working with a governor who seemed more interested in

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<sup>6</sup> Romney resigned as governor on January 22, 1969 to become Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Nixon administration.

rebuilding downtown Detroit than his predecessor. The mayor hoped Milliken's administration would take more of an interest in urban problems. In January 1969, Cavanagh noted that Milliken "has long expressed an interest in the problems of Detroit and other cities in Michigan."<sup>7</sup> Milliken had previously served as a state senator and lieutenant governor.

Detroiters had good reason to believe that Milliken's tenure as governor would result in an economic resurgence for the city. As Milliken prepared to take office in January 1969, he assured Detroiters that he and Cavanagh had "established over the years a good personal relationship." He continued, "I look forward to a close working partnership with Detroit and Wayne County officials in discharging our joint responsibilities to the people who have elected us." Milliken added that he had a plan for solving Michigan's urban problems but refused to offer any useful details.<sup>8</sup> Just days later, Milliken gave a State of the State address, even before officially taking office. Promising to address the myriad issues facing Detroit, Milliken remained vague but provided greater detail for his plan to solve Michigan's urban problems, including the use of state funds for vocational training and education for poor adult urban residents, housing and social services for urbanites, and "wholesome recreation experiences for children of the inner city."<sup>9</sup> How much money he and the Legislature would commit to such projects was unclear, likely because he did not want to risk any political leverage in discussing specifics before even taking office.

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<sup>7</sup> "City Property Tax Hike Likely," *Detroit Free Press*, 4 Jan 1969.

<sup>8</sup> "Milliken: You'll See Changes in January," *Detroit Free Press*, 5 Jan 1969.

<sup>9</sup> "Text of Lt. Gov. Milliken's State-of-the-State Message," *Detroit Free Press*, 10 Jan 1969.

The rapid suburbanization of Detroit shifted the political landscape within Michigan. Some politicians, like Milliken, wanted to provide support to central cities, but they also established platforms and policies to appease suburban voters. The total population of the Detroit metropolitan area grew 11.6 percent throughout the 1960s, but the population of the central city fell by 9.5 percent from 1960 to 1970.<sup>10</sup> Like several other metropolitan areas throughout the country, Detroit was becoming more suburban, and middle-class citizens formed a residential and economic circle around the central city. Milliken felt a duty to support Detroit with state funds, but he could not ignore the growing political power of Michigan suburbanites.

One major issue which hampered Milliken's plans to help rebuild Detroit was the state budget crunch he assumed upon taking office. A *Free Press* editorial doubted that Milliken's proposals would be enacted, and even if they were, there was not enough available money to ensure their effectiveness in solving Detroit's problems. His programs were viewed as merely "pilot programs" to provide funds to disadvantaged schools, promote black entrepreneurship, and prevent a reoccurrence of civil disorders like the 1967 riot. Unless the state received federal support, the available state funds would be insufficient to provide any sort of long-term solution to Detroit's growing racial and economic problems.<sup>11</sup>

Detroit suffered from a declining population, a significant demographic shift from white, middle-class workers, to underemployed or unemployed blacks, and entrenched

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1970 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> "Few New State Funds Budgeted for Cities," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 Jan 1969.

racial discrimination within city government and the police department. Cavanagh acknowledged the city's significant economic distress in early 1969 as he called for the Detroit Common Council to support a property tax hike to try to balance the municipal budget. He argued that "it's the only thing I could do to balance the budget and satisfy the budget requirements."<sup>12</sup> Milliken's proposed state programs were a step in the right direction, but on their own, they would do little to reverse Detroit's decline. Much more effort and funding were needed from local, state, and federal governments.

Despite the state's lack of economic flexibility, civic and business leaders in Detroit pressed forward with their plans to build a modern, downtown stadium. On February 5, Cavanagh presented his ideas for a riverfront ballpark to the Board of Directors of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce. Afterwards, the Board passed resolutions to support the mayor's proposal for a massive commercial/stadium complex on eighty acres of land immediately west of Cobo Hall near the riverfront and authorized Board Chairman Frank Colombo, Executive Vice President of the J. L. Hudson Company, to appoint a task force to execute the project.<sup>13</sup> Colombo appointed Thomas Adams, chairman of the advertising company Campbell-Ewald, as chairman of the Stadium Task Force, placing the preliminary details for the West Cobo Hall project in the hands of a successful business and community leader.

Cavanagh understood, though, that he could not achieve his goal of building a riverfront stadium without the approval and support of the Detroit Common Council. Many of the Council's members had been directly involved in rebuilding and cleanup

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<sup>12</sup> "City Property Tax Hike Likely," *Detroit Free Press*, 4 Jan 1969.

<sup>13</sup> Draft of DSWG Special Report, 25 January 1971, Box 1 Folder 12, DEDC Collection.

efforts from the riot two years before and were reluctant to approve such an expensive project unless Cavanagh could assure them that it would benefit the entire city, not just Ford, Fetzer, and a handful of other wealthy businessmen. One week after taking his proposal to the Chamber's Board of Directors, Cavanagh addressed the Common Council, hoping his presentation would serve two main purposes—to demonstrate the economic benefits a new stadium would bring to Detroit and to explain why the stadium should be built in the downtown, riverfront area. Cavanagh predicted that a new stadium and surrounding commercial area could draw even more conventions to Detroit, in addition to the \$140 million in convention revenues estimated by 1980.<sup>14</sup> He mentioned several stadiums throughout the country already built or in the planning and construction stages, including Busch Stadium in St. Louis and a new facility in Cincinnati scheduled to open in 1970. Regarding St. Louis's new ballpark, which opened in 1966, Cavanagh exclaimed, "It is amazing how downtown St. Louis has been revitalized through the building of this stadium," hoping to convince Council members that a Detroit stadium would have the same effect.<sup>15</sup>

On the flip side, however, Cavanagh subtly warned the Council of the consequences for downtown if the stadium were either built away from the riverfront or not at all. In contrast to Busch Stadium in St. Louis, Cavanagh referenced the problems faced by businesses in downtown Houston as a result of the Astrodome being built on the outskirts of the city. Houston's central business district was facing problems that could

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<sup>14</sup> Presentation by Cavanagh to Common Council—of plan for commercial-stadium complex west of Cobo Hall, 14 February 1969, Jerome Cavanagh Papers, Box 513 Folder 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

have been remedied by a downtown sports complex, in Cavanagh's estimation. "The now famous Houston Astrodome," Cavanagh claimed, "is a paradox. It was built out of the downtown area and now its promoters find that they must add convention facilities near the stadium. I might add that downtown Houston is suffering economic problems since the stadium was built."<sup>16</sup> These were valid arguments in favor of a riverfront stadium, but some Council members wondered whether valuable downtown property could be put to better use than as the site of a massive professional sports facility.<sup>17</sup>

As the Common Council debated the value of a municipal stadium in the heart of downtown, the specter of losing a significant cultural symbol like a major league sports team to the suburbs was not lost on the Detroit media. The city's mainstream press expressed concern over a continuing lack of progress on a new stadium. In particular, Detroit's major newspapers endorsed a riverfront stadium over all other possible locations. A *Detroit News* editorial in late February warned Detroit's Common Council that it "had better get together with Mayor Cavanagh to promote a downtown site for a sports stadium, or this city may find itself left out in the cold entirely."<sup>18</sup> If city leaders continued to hem and haw over when and where to build the facility, the editorial continued, it might be too late, as several suburbs were in the midst of developing and publicizing their own stadium plans.

The Metropolitan Stadium Committee previously determined that downtown was inaccessible to many of the metropolitan area's residents, and not enough land was

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Council Divided on Stadium Site," *Detroit News*, 20 February 1969.

<sup>18</sup> "Lions, Tigers to Leave Detroit? It Could Happen!" *Detroit News*, 27 February 1969.



available for such a project. But in early 1969, Detroit was in the midst of extensive highway construction which city leaders hoped would make the riverfront and the central business district more accessible to even the most outlying suburbs. The new Chrysler expressway opened in January, providing a non-stop route between downtown Detroit and the northern suburbs, including Pontiac and Royal Oak. City officials expected the new highway to give suburbanites to the north a faster path into and out of the city while alleviating traffic on other major arteries such as the Lodge Freeway.<sup>19</sup> If the new highways cleared up traffic jams as expected, suburban residents could drive into downtown for a Tigers or Lions game and quickly escape from the central city once the game ended.

The importance of highway construction linking downtown and the outlying metropolitan area demonstrated the growing political and economic influence of suburban citizens. The survival of downtown Detroit depended on an influx of revenue from suburban consumers. But despite the construction of new highways, officials in Detroit's suburbs were skeptical that residents could travel into and out of downtown with such ease. They accused Governor Milliken of "playing politics." Pontiac officials dismissed Milliken's support for a downtown stadium as "nothing but a pitch for Democratic votes in a Democratic area."<sup>20</sup> These officials focused on the findings of the Metropolitan Stadium Committee, which supported a suburban site for the new sport facility. Suburban leaders in Pontiac, Southfield, and several other cities used the committee's conclusions as proof that Detroit could not build a stadium within its city

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<sup>19</sup> "Pontiac to Detroit in Half an Hour by Car," *Detroit Free Press*, 9 Jan 1969.

<sup>20</sup> *Detroit News*, 7 Nov 1969.

limits, and these leaders were emboldened to present their own cases to William Clay Ford and John Fetzer to determine their interest in possibly leaving the Motor City.

Both Ford and Fetzer understood that much of their customer base was now outside the city. By 1970, they were open to the possibility of leaving Detroit. Ford showed his interest in a more public manner, however, perhaps as a way of gaining leverage and concessions from Cavanagh and Detroit's stadium planners. In March 1969, Ford announced that Southfield was the "leading candidate" to build the new stadium. Fetzer, meanwhile, made no public announcements about Southfield's plan, but he was reportedly "enthusiastic" about the city's proposal.<sup>21</sup> The Southfield plan included a multi-purpose, domed stadium near Telegraph Road and I-696, a busy interchange in the northwest suburb which would become even more congested if tens of thousands of spectators descended on the area during game days. Ford understood the logistical challenges to overcome, but those same challenges would have existed with a downtown stadium, and the Southfield plan would have placed the stadium closer to the population center of the metropolitan area.

The Southfield plan and the reaction to it exemplified the contested and racially-divided landscape of postwar urban America.<sup>22</sup> Plans to build a suburban stadium and

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<sup>21</sup> "Surprise Southfield Site Leads in Race for Stadium," *Detroit News*, 14 March 1969.

<sup>22</sup> See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). For a recent critique of the urban/suburban and racial binaries that have made up much of the historiographical literature of postwar America, see Matthew D. Lassiter and Christopher Niedt, "Suburban Diversity in Postwar America," *Journal Of Urban History*, 39, no. 1 (January 2013), 3-14. Lassiter and Niedt argue that many postwar suburbs were more diverse than historians have recognized, although many suburban neighborhoods still adhered to strict racial divides.

draw the Tigers and Lions away from Detroit were met with significant opposition from Detroit leaders, ordinary citizens, and the city's mainstream press. Mayor Cavanagh claimed that a riverfront stadium could bring millions of dollars in revenue to downtown businesses but cautioned that building the new stadium in Southfield "would seriously affect the economic vitality of major services in downtown, such as hotels, restaurants, and other businesses."<sup>23</sup> Members of Michigan's state legislature agreed with Cavanagh that a new stadium could help revive downtown and benefit the entire region.<sup>24</sup> State Senate President Thomas Schweigert and Democratic leader Sander Levin sent letters to all mayors in Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland counties asking that they give their support to the downtown stadium plan. In the letter, Schweigert and Levin warned, "If residents in the tricounty area fail to cooperate to make the stadium an instrument of urban development, there is little hope we can solve the more complex urban problems in education, housing and recreation, which require a coalition of urban and suburban communities."<sup>25</sup> Schweigert and Levin used the stadium as a test subject for urban/suburban cooperation while expecting the suburbs to step aside for the benefit of the central city.

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<sup>23</sup> "Stadium Crucial to Downtown—Mayor," *Detroit News*, 19 March 1969.

<sup>24</sup> Urban planner and historian June Manning Thomas argues that politicians hoping to revive Detroit's downtown were fighting an uphill battle because of a few major disadvantages the downtown area faced compared to other cities, particularly the lack of a public transit system, the spread of the auto industry to outlying areas, and the local geography, which was open and flat, allowing residents to live far from the city center. In comparison, a city like San Francisco, on a peninsula, had far less land area. Its residents were compressed in a way Detroit's were not; June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 66.

<sup>25</sup> "Downtown Stadium Gets Senate Push," *Detroit News*, 29 March 1969.

Many suburbanites in the Detroit metropolitan area supported plans to bring a professional team to their city, but some suburban residents saw little benefit in hosting a sports franchise and spending millions of taxpayer dollars to construct a massive, municipal stadium. Opposition among citizen groups in Southfield demonstrated that the stadium plan did not have unanimous approval within the suburb. A local attorney gained support among a large number of Southfield residents for a petition to change the city's zoning ordinance to prohibit construction of a stadium with more than twelve thousand seats.<sup>26</sup> Passage of such an ordinance would have effectively destroyed any chance for Southfield to lure a professional team.

The debate over the potential location of a new stadium illuminated the spatial distribution of racial groups in metropolitan Detroit. White citizens fled the central city by the tens of thousands since the early 1950s as growing numbers of black middle-class residents sought adequate housing outside the inner-city ghetto.<sup>27</sup> By the late 1960s, white residents had established segregated enclaves throughout suburban Detroit as blacks moved into middle-class housing throughout the city. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought attention to racial segregation in northern cities<sup>28</sup>, and some Detroiters connected the city's racial divisions with the stadium dispute. Frederick

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<sup>26</sup> "Southfield petitions ask ban on a Big Stadium," *Detroit News*, 21 March 1969.

<sup>27</sup> There is some debate among historians as to when "white flight" reached its apex in Detroit. Thomas Sugrue claims that deindustrialization and federal housing policies contributed to large numbers of white Detroiters moving away from the city center throughout the 1950s. Heather Ann Thompson, however, argues that the final straw leading to a mass white exodus from Detroit was the election of Coleman Young, Detroit's first African-American mayor, in 1973. Young's election symbolized a shift in Detroit's political power to black citizens. See Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, and Heather Ann Thompson, "Rethinking the Politics of White Flight in the Postwar City: Detroit, 1945-1980," *Journal of Urban History* 25, no. 2 (Jan. 1999), 163-198.

<sup>28</sup> On the effect of the civil rights movement and Great Society programs on Cavanagh's liberal hopes for Detroit, see Kevin Boyle, "A Dream Gone Awry," *Michigan History* 88, no. 5 (Sept. 2004), 34-42.

Haynes, a concerned citizen, wrote a letter to William Clay Ford to express his anger over Ford's support for the Southfield plan. Haynes called the Lions and Tigers "institutions" and declared that moving them out of Detroit "would be comparable to closing J.L. Hudson's downtown store." Haynes continued, "During this time of black awareness, I feel as a Black man that most members of my race will view any attempt to move the Lions and the Tigers from downtown Detroit—even to the fairgrounds—as an act of racism. There is already some talk of a boycott by Black players and fans if the teams are moved to Southfield."<sup>29</sup> One local journalist agreed with Haynes that much of the debate over where to build the stadium was based on racial discrimination and fear. Philip H. Power claimed that some citizens were "reluctant of going into Detroit to see a ball game for fear of getting beaten up, or having their car stolen, or being robbed. By whom? By Negroes, of course." Power worried that such fear could lead to even greater segregation in the future: "Once you start putting up a stadium in one place or another for racial reasons, (veiled racial reasons, but racial reasons all the same) you start breaking down your fans into blacks and whites."<sup>30</sup>

A *Detroit Free Press* editorial tried to put a positive spin on the stadium fight, celebrating the fact that it refocused attention on the importance of central cities: "The suburbs have come to a renewed appreciation of the services the central city is rendering, and its necessity to its surrounding neighbors....It is a great thing that people outside Detroit are coming to appreciate the flavor and richness and importance of a city which is

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Frederick Haynes to William Clay Ford, 19 March 1969, Cavanagh Papers, Box 513, Folder 6.

<sup>30</sup> "Racial Shadow Over the Stadium," by Philip H. Power, *Detroit Free Press*, 28 March 1969.

so very dear to those of us who walk its ways daily. They are welcome here. It's their town, too."<sup>31</sup> The *Free Press*, like other major urban newspapers, had reasons for supporting the central city over the suburbs. Newspaper publishers often had personal or professional connections with political leaders and business elites in the city, sometimes skewing a paper's editorial stances. Also, keeping sports teams in the city raised or maintained the city's cultural status and simultaneously raised the status of the city's major media outlets.<sup>32</sup> The national reputation of the *Free Press* and its journalists certainly benefited from anything that improved Detroit's image throughout the country.

The downtown and Southfield proposals dominated the headlines throughout February and March 1969, but organizers at the State Fairgrounds remained optimistic that they could gain the approval of William Clay Ford and John Fetzer. The shifting population center of the metropolitan area gave the State Fairgrounds promoters a distinct advantage over downtown, as most middle-class residents in the region lived much closer to the Fairgrounds. Alfred Glancy, Jr. and the State Fair Development Authority commissioned a research firm to study the feasibility of a domed stadium at the Fairgrounds. Stadium proponents had discussed the Fairgrounds as a potential home for a civic stadium since the 1940s, but those discussions centered on the construction of an open-air, Olympic stadium, rather than a domed stadium built primarily for professional football and baseball. Glancy remained convinced that building on the Fairgrounds site

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<sup>31</sup> "Stadium issue Dramatizes the Role of Central City," *Detroit Free Press*, 27 March 1969.

<sup>32</sup> Danielson, *Home Team*, 113.

would avert major traffic jams and parking problems that would occur with a downtown facility.<sup>33</sup>

The construction of a municipal stadium had the support of a large segment of the state legislature. In April 1969, the legislature authorized the creation of a stadium authority to plan and construct a new baseball-football stadium for the Detroit metro area, either within Detroit's city limits or in the surrounding suburbs. House Bill 2020 created a stadium authority, consisting of three members appointed by the governor. The authority's responsibilities were to plan and construct a stadium, issue revenue bonds secured by revenues of the stadium, and lease the facility to private enterprises.<sup>34</sup> State politicians hoped that a new stadium could bring economic benefits to the Detroit area and symbolize the metropolitan area's continued role as Michigan's economic and industrial leader.

Other interest groups had specific goals in mind for the location of the stadium. Throughout 1969, the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce was committed to building a new downtown stadium in Detroit. Members of the Chamber agreed that "downtown Detroit offers the most favorable and feasible site for a new baseball-football stadium."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Chamber members subscribed to the notion that what is best for the central city is best for the suburbs, claiming that a downtown stadium "will be in the best interests of professional sports, commercial and industrial activity, the revival and

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<sup>33</sup> "Firm Chosen to Study Fairgrounds Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 1 March 1969.

<sup>34</sup> "Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce: 'Comments on House Bills 2020 and 2969, Michigan Legislature, 1969'", 11 April 1969, Box 1, Folder 1, Detroit Economic Development Corporation Collection, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

development of the inner city, and the general interests of the people of the City of Detroit, southeastern Michigan and the State of Michigan.”<sup>36</sup> After deciding to build the new stadium downtown, the Chamber’s Downtown Stadium Working Group (DSWG) took responsibility for developing a stadium plan. The DSWG, a committee of twenty-one civic leaders headed by local advertising executive Thomas Adams, and local businessmen Robert Sweany and Michael Cherry, first needed to find a downtown site suitable for a new stadium. After briefly considering other locations throughout the city, they decided to build along the Detroit River in downtown Detroit, in the West Cobo Hall location because it appeared to supply “reasonable solutions to the challenging [sic] opportunities of the downtown stadium complex,” particularly issues of land acquisition, land cost, and easy access to Detroit’s main traffic arteries and highways.<sup>37</sup> Cherry concluded that the stadium should be domed in order to meet the needs of professional sports franchises, following the contemporary logic that open air stadiums were obsolete and out of place in modern urban America.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the work of the DSWG and the passage of state legislation to create a stadium authority, Ford accused Detroit leaders of stalling the progress of stadium construction. He challenged Cavanagh and the DSWG to “take some constructive action” and lamented the fact that no major developments had occurred: “No property has been acquired, nor has anyone come forth with a plan for financing a stadium there. Meanwhile, cities smaller than Detroit have gone ahead and accomplished what we

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> “COMAC Company Inter-Office Memorandum from Michael Cherry to Gerald Daugherty,” 23 December 1969, Box 1, Folder 7, DEDC.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



merely debate.”<sup>39</sup> Ford was clearly implying that Southfield and other suburban locations had presented more complete and attractive proposals than either the DSWG or the State Fair Development Authority. Throughout 1969, Ford showed no preference for a downtown stadium. He never threatened to move his team out of the area or out of Michigan. He was, however, perfectly willing to play in a suburban stadium if taxpayers paid for land acquisition and construction.

Ford’s willingness to move his team outside the city limits was understandable. Not only were several suburban areas steadily growing in population and prominence, their leaders and citizens were competing with each other over which would be the preeminent suburb in the region. Many felt that serving as the home to the Lions and Tigers would bring considerable prestige to their respective communities.<sup>40</sup> By late summer, competition between Detroit’s suburbs over stadium construction heated up as suburban leaders took Ford’s public statements as an opportunity to bring the Lions and Tigers to their respective cities and achieve greater cultural prominence. Southfield continued its plans for a massive facility. Its planners were in the preliminary stages of designing a 60,000-seat stadium, surface parking for nearly 22,000 vehicles, and a neighboring hotel with 450 units. Officials estimated the cost of the entire complex between \$96 million and \$106 million. The stadium itself accounted for around \$70 million of the total project. The lead developer, Robert Forte, stated that he had \$80

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<sup>39</sup> “Lions Owner Says City is Stalling New Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 8 May 1969.

<sup>40</sup> Cincinnati faced a similar dilemma in the late 1950s and early 1960s as Reds owner Powel Crosley demanded that the city pay to renovate Crosley Field in order to keep the Reds in Cincinnati. Stadium supporters feared that the city would lose prestige if its baseball team moved out of town. See Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 76.

million in commitments from investors, and a bond sale could make up the remaining cost.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, civic leaders in Pontiac worked out details on a stadium proposal to challenge Southfield. Pontiac's developers raised the bar and promised two separate facilities, one for football and one for baseball. They hoped this plan would set them apart from existing proposals for Southfield, downtown, and the Fairgrounds, which were designed for a single, multi-purpose stadium. Pontiac's plan placed the potential stadium sites adjacent to Interstate 75 near Michigan State Road 59, hoping to create easy accessibility to events. Pontiac leaders believed they could design and construct two separate facilities at a cost of \$65 million, similar to the estimated cost of the Southfield and downtown multi-purpose stadium plans.<sup>42</sup> Officials did not specify whether the dual stadiums would be domed, but they likely realized that Ford and Fetzer preferred their potential new homes to be protected from Detroit's extreme climate. Regardless of the details in the proposals for Southfield and Pontiac, stadium planners in both cities accomplished what Detroit's leaders could not. They developed comprehensive strategies for designing, financing, and constructing a professional sports facility and were garnering the attention of William Clay Ford and John Fetzer.

Fetzer, though, was less eager than William Clay Ford to leave Tiger Stadium. Before stadium negotiations continued, Fetzer wanted to make clear his requirements if the Tigers were to leave its home ballpark. He issued a memorandum to "all interested parties" detailing the conditions under which he would give up control of Tiger Stadium

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<sup>41</sup> "Time Is Running out on Downtown Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 12 July 1969.

<sup>42</sup> "Pontiac Enters a Bid for Pair of Stadiums," *Detroit Free Press*, 1 July 1969.

and move his team to the new facility. Among his demands were: a forty-year lease, a variable rent payment based on a percentage of ticket revenues, office space within the stadium for the Tigers' front office, and scheduling priority over other teams and events. Fetzer conceded that the owners of the stadium would keep all parking revenues, and the Tigers and owners would share the costs of cleaning and maintenance. Fetzer noted that although he and the Tigers organization supported the construction of a new stadium, they "did not initiate the idea....Our present stadium facilities have been kept up and will be operated in a state of good repair until such time as a new stadium is available."<sup>43</sup>

As citizens, politicians, architects, and urban planners argued over where the prospective stadium should be built, some journalists used their platform to draw attention to the importance of the design of the new building. Recently built professional sports facilities too often lacked any sort of aesthetic value or artistic expression. Multi-purpose stadiums in San Francisco, Queens, New York, St. Louis, and San Diego were built with an eye toward function over form. Their playing surfaces were symmetrical, and their outer appearances, while impressive in terms of sheer size, failed to capture the eye the way a previous era of ballparks did, such as Yankee Stadium in the Bronx and Shibe Park in Philadelphia. Max Lapide of the *Detroit News* worried that the new Detroit stadium would "lack its own personality." He wanted an asymmetrical playing field, harkening back to Fenway Park and Ebbets Field, whose architects had to work within the confines of existing rail lines, roads, and pedestrian routes. The new era of ballparks had enough land to build parking lots around the stadium, and their architects were not

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<sup>43</sup> Memorandum from John Fetzer to "all interested parties," 5 August 1969, DEDC Collection, Box 4 Folder 15.

limited in the size and shape of their creations. Lapidé complained, “When you watch a game on television, it seems like every game is being played in the same place. And part of the fun of baseball is in watching the teams play in different parks and seeing how they iron out the various layout peculiarities.”<sup>44</sup>

Lapidé also represented a seemingly small number of Detroiters who preferred an open-air stadium over a domed ballpark. He observed that “part of the enjoyment of going to a ballgame is to take a look at how the wind is blowing and to speculate on how it will affect the game....After all, these are baseball fields, not greenhouses, and the vagaries of the weather are part of the whole package.”<sup>45</sup> Many stadium designers and team owners during the 1960s certainly preferred a dome, especially after the novelty and success of the Astrodome in Houston, but the additional cost often prevented local governments and investors from supporting what could only be considered an extravagant luxury. John Fetzer repeatedly voiced his desire for a domed stadium but, being a franchise owner in the late 1960s, he was not going to be the one paying the construction costs.

Although much of the public stadium discussion over the summer months of 1969 revolved around downtown and various suburbs, the State Fair Authority had not given up. Authority members still hoped that the Fairgrounds would serve as the future home of the new municipal stadium. Alfred Glancy and his associates lost much of their momentum in January 1969 when William Milliken replaced George Romney as governor. Romney worked closely with members of the state legislature to secure

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<sup>44</sup> “Please, No More Custom Stadiums,” *Detroit News*, 10 August 1969.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

funding for stadium construction on the Fairgrounds, but Milliken believed a new professional sports complex could revitalize downtown. He assured Cavanagh and downtown stadium proponents that he would support construction of a riverfront stadium, telling the local press, “A new stadium, when built, should be located within the city of Detroit. I personally favor a downtown site for this stadium.”<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, in August 1969, the State Fair Authority requested a feasibility study for a domed stadium at the State Fairgrounds. Stanford Research Institute (SRI) predicted that a \$90 million domed stadium would bring in approximately \$225 million in new income to the community. Researchers approximated that the stadium would generate \$450 million in retail sales. Taxed at four percent, state and local governments would generate \$18 million annually.<sup>47</sup> But the study seemed overly optimistic on its projected attendance and adjacent development. SRI assumed that attendance at baseball games, football games, and various other events would climb gradually over the next twenty years. Most new facilities, though, saw attendance drop after the novelty of the first few years wore off. The study also mentioned “other developments” near the stadium which would generate additional income and tax revenue, but researchers did not specify what types of developments.<sup>48</sup> Further, they failed to note that attendance at Tiger Stadium was near the top of the American League throughout much of the team’s

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<sup>46</sup> “Governor Favors Downtown Stadium Site, *Detroit*, 3 Nov 1969.

<sup>47</sup> Comparative Feasibility Analysis of Domed Versus Undomed Stadium at Michigan State Fairgrounds Prepared for Stadium and Fair Development Committee, Stanford Research Institute, South Pasadena, CA, August 1969, State of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

history, but much of the area surrounding Tiger Stadium had fallen into disrepair, and there were no major developments on the horizon.

One other significant point that the study failed to grasp was that football, although popular, had a very limited number of games each season. SRI acknowledged that football was becoming the country's most popular spectator sport, and new facilities needed to be able to meet rising demand.<sup>49</sup> But the firm did not acknowledge that football teams played only seven home games each regular season, with two preseason games and the possibility of two more playoff contests. Such a schedule presented limited opportunities for local businesses to profit from large crowds, limited working hours for gameday employees, and offered the distinct possibility that a new, expensive stadium might sit idle for much of the year. SRI considered the possibility that the Pistons basketball team or hockey's Red Wings might move into a domed stadium as well, but neither gave any indication up to this point that they were interested in sharing a facility with the city's other professional franchises. Most of the other stadium proposals up to this point assumed that the Tigers and Lions would move together into a multi-purpose facility, but no one stated publicly whether they would spend tens of millions of dollars on a new stadium if only one of the teams was willing to relocate.

By October 1969, it seemed that many of the pieces were falling into place for the downtown stadium plan. One of the private developers who led the main investors in the Southfield plan began scouting land in Detroit for stadium development, dealing a major

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

blow to Southfield's hopes to draw the Tigers or Lions away from the central city.<sup>50</sup>

Southfield had one of the most complete and attractive suburban proposals earlier in the year but lost much of its momentum and financial assurances, allowing other proposals to jump to the forefront, particularly the riverfront plan.

In mid-October, Cavanagh announced that all of the major problems which had slowed down the domed riverfront stadium had been solved, and he would relay that message to Gov. Milliken. Those issues, particularly land acquisition and financing, had delayed downtown stadium development for several years, but Cavanagh claimed that the DSWG had made significant progress since its inception earlier in the year. Milliken assured Detroiters that he supported the downtown redevelopment plan: "There are many urgent needs facing our urban centers, but if the Detroit community itself wants this stadium as a priority development, the State of Michigan will cooperate in every appropriate way."<sup>51</sup> Less than a week later, he offered an explicit endorsement of a downtown stadium.<sup>52</sup> Milliken added that he and Cavanagh had agreed to establish their own working group within the next two months to push the plan forward while he also acknowledged that the group should recommend the best alternative site if it determined the downtown location to be unfeasible.<sup>53</sup> But Thomas Adams, head of the stadium working group and chairman of the Campbell-Ewald advertising firm, was optimistic that a new stadium would be an economic boon to downtown. Adams believed the facility

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<sup>50</sup> "Downtown Stadium Hopes Soar," *Detroit News*, 17 Oct 1969.

<sup>51</sup> Statement from Gov. William Milliken on Detroit Stadium, 28 Oct 1969, DEDC Collection, Box 2 Folder 3.

<sup>52</sup> "Governor Favors Downtown Stadium Site," *Detroit*, 3 Nov 1969.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

would “bring prestige and additional revenue from sporting events to the city, but it will also provide a focal point for immediately adjacent business developments that will help to revitalize the whole downtown area of Detroit.”<sup>54</sup>

Detroit leaders and the city’s mainstream press celebrated Milliken’s announcement. Editors at the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* had backed the downtown stadium plan for the past several years, and they continued boosting the plan as it seemed to be becoming a reality. A November 10 editorial in the *Detroit News* declared, “Gov. Milliken’s forthright endorsement of a downtown Detroit site for a new sports stadium is a welcome morale booster for all Detroiters and especially for the incoming city administration.”<sup>55</sup> The press had long argued that a downtown facility would be most beneficial to the city and the region because of the potential placement of such an important economic and cultural symbol among the city’s skyscrapers, theaters, and department stores.

Many suburban leaders and residents, though, disagreed with Milliken that downtown Detroit was the optimal location for the domed stadium. Pontiac had already developed its own proposal for William Clay Ford and John Fetzer, and the city’s leaders remained confident that the nearly five-hundred-acre site would entice the team owners to move to the suburbs. They believed Milliken’s endorsement of the downtown location to be politically motivated. One Pontiac official dismissed the governor’s statement as

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Boost for a Downtown Stadium,” *Detroit News*, 10 November 1969.



“nothing but a pitch for Democratic votes in a Democratic area.”<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, the decision was not Milliken’s to make. Suburban officials remained confident that Ford and Fetzer would see through the political gamesmanship and choose the plan they deemed to be the best investment for their franchises.

By the end of 1969, the DSWG was making gradual progress on preliminary plans for the downtown stadium. The committee, not wanting to lose its momentum, consulted with Robert Hastings, president of the prestigious architectural firm, Smith, Hinchmann, & Grylls, on what to do next. Hastings recommended that the DSWG answer some of the most basic questions regarding stadium design: Will the stadium be domed? Will parking be on surface lots, in garages, or underneath the stadium? What is the planning schedule? What is the construction plan? He recommended visiting other cities in which similar projects have succeeded in order to gain as much information as possible on design, financing, and construction.<sup>57</sup>

In particular, Detroit’s stadium planners seemed interested in Seattle’s plans for a downtown stadium near the city’s World’s Fair property. Seattle hosted the World’s Fair in 1962 and built the famous Space Needle in the heart of the city in hopes of drawing tourists into the city and developing a bustling commercial district.<sup>58</sup> Detroit’s planners had a connection with the Seattle project. An executive with Alfred Glancy’s real estate company was on the Seattle stadium committee. Glancy told Hans Gehrke

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<sup>56</sup> “3 Suburbs Dissent on Site for Stadium,” *Detroit News*, 7 November 1969.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Robert F. Hastings, President, Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc., 15 December 1969, DEDC Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

<sup>58</sup> See John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 214-64.

that he could set up a meeting with the Seattle stadium committee to view the site and discuss the details of the project.<sup>59</sup> The two cities had a common desire to build an attraction which would draw consumers to downtown and help revitalize the central city.

Members of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce felt strongly that a downtown stadium had not only an economic importance, but served as a major symbol of Detroit's resurgence as one of the great cities in America. The Chamber issued a news release in November 1969, trying to rally the public around the idea of a downtown stadium. Americans associated nearly every great city with a particular symbol, such as the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, the Space Needle in Seattle, or the Empire State Building in New York. These cultural symbols, according to DSWG Chairman Thomas Adams, "have symbolized revitalization and civic enthusiasm in their respective cities, and a new stadium in a sport-minded town like Detroit can give us a major boost. It can provide a focal point for business development in the adjacent areas that will give new forward thrust to downtown Detroit."<sup>60</sup> In late 1969, Detroit evoked images of riots and burned-out buildings among most Americans. Adams and the DSWG hoped the new stadium would demonstrate that Detroit was a city of progress, not decay.

The Chamber was also preparing for a change in Detroit's municipal leadership as Jerome Cavanagh was leaving his role as mayor in January 1970. Cavanagh's political fortunes declined following an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate in 1966 and the devastation of the riot in July 1967. He refused an opportunity to run for a third term as

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<sup>59</sup> Letter from Alfred R. Glancy, Jr. to Hans Gehrke, Jr., 5 December 1969, DEDC Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

<sup>60</sup> Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce News Release, 13 November 1969, DEDC Collection, Box 2 Folder 3.

mayor and decided to leave public office altogether. Incoming mayor Roman Gribbs was also a Democrat, and stadium planners trusted that he would provide a stable change of leadership in which the downtown plan could continue to progress. Regardless of who occupied the mayor's office, though, stadium discussions could only continue with the cooperation of William Clay Ford and John Fetzer. Fetzer gave every indication that he supported the downtown stadium plan. Ford, however, seemed more willing to look at all possibilities of stadium sites throughout the metropolitan area, particularly in Pontiac, where city leaders offered Ford major financial incentives to move his franchise outside Detroit.

#### **1970: Pontiac Makes a Serious Push for Ford's Attention**

Ford seemed to feel little allegiance toward Detroit itself rather than the Detroit metropolitan area. A grandson of Henry Ford, William Clay Ford grew up in suburban Dearborn and began his career in the heart of the Detroit automotive industry. He was elected to Ford Motor Company's board of directors in 1948 at the age of twenty-three and purchased the Detroit Lions in 1964 after accumulating a fortune as a top executive at Ford.<sup>61</sup> Almost immediately after buying the team, he used his business experience to lobby for a new stadium built specifically for football. The Lions had played in Tiger Stadium since 1938, and Ford realized that the baseball facility was keeping the Lions from maximizing their profits. Unlike the automobile company, Ford had complete control over the Lions and ran the business his own way. He was determined to turn the

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<sup>61</sup> Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Fords: An American Epic* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 315.

franchise into a financial success.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Ford was willing to consider any possible alternative, even if it meant moving the Lions outside the city limits to Pontiac.

Ford made no attempt to hide his discussions with Pontiac leaders from the DSWG or the City of Detroit. In a March 1970 letter to Detroit Mayor Roman Gribbs, Ford admitted that the Lions were in serious stadium discussions with the city of Pontiac. Ford, however, acknowledged that no final decision had been made, and he was willing to end his discussions with Pontiac “if satisfactory progress is made by the City of Detroit toward construction of a stadium within the Detroit city limits.”<sup>63</sup> In the same letter, though, Ford expressed his frustration over several years of failed progress regarding the creation of a new downtown stadium. He maintained that the Lions “have waited many years for a stadium to be built in downtown Detroit. We would like to be a party to a project which might help in bringing about the revitalization of our downtown area. However, it is our frank opinion that the City of Detroit continues to lag regarding the construction of a stadium facility.”<sup>64</sup> City leaders, particularly former mayor Jerome Cavanagh, began earnest discussions of a new stadium for the Lions following the Mayor’s Stadium Committee report in 1967, but they continued to delay any decisions and shifted plans and organizing efforts to various committees, possibly because of the 1967 riot. Clean-up efforts became top priority, and Cavanagh probably gave little serious consideration to building a new stadium in the immediate aftermath of the riot.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> “Letter to Mayor Roman Gribbs from William Clay Ford,” 4 March 1970, Box 4, Folder 11, DEDC.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Ford's frustration was understandable after developments (or lack thereof) in the early months of 1970. In January, a group of architects working as consultants to the DSWG discussed some of the details of the potential stadium, including whether it should have a dome, the location of parking structures, and the seating capacity of the facility. It seemed at first glance that substantial steps were about to be taken toward construction, but the DSWG refused to rush into any such project. As one DSWG member described the group's expectations of the consultants, "There will be no attempt to become involved in the actual design of a stadium at this stage."<sup>65</sup> The next month, the consultants recommended a 60,000-seat, domed stadium to be completed in forty months at a cost of nearly \$100 million.<sup>66</sup> Ford, though, could not understand why the major details of the stadium continued to change. He wondered why city leaders shifted the stadium focus to downtown after so much effort had been made in developing a feasible plan for the Fairgrounds. "The Fairgrounds site had some pluses going for it," Ford told Mayor Roman Gribbs in March, "namely, its central location and the fact that it was State-owned property. This site would not require any land acquisition cost whatsoever."<sup>67</sup> Contemporary urban planning theories regarding the revitalization of downtown areas as catalysts to regional growth contributed to indecision among stadium planners and frustrated William Clay Ford to the point that he was now leaning toward moving his football team out of the Motor City.

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<sup>65</sup> Letter from Nathan Johnson, Nathan Johnson & Associates, Inc., to G. Merritt Martin, Vice President for Programming, Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, 9 Jan 1970, DEDC Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Hans Gehrke, Jr., Chairman of the Stadium Subcommittee, DSWG, to Tom Adams, Chairman of the DSWG, 27 Feb 1970, DEDC Collection, Box 2 Folder 4.

<sup>67</sup> Letter from William Clay Ford to Roman Gribbs, 4 March 1970, DEDC collection, Box 4 Folder 11.

Ford believed his team was popular enough and brought enough additional revenue to the area that it deserved a new stadium designed specifically for football. He also understood the growing cultural importance of professional football and knew that many Detroiters viewed the Lions franchise as a mark of Detroit's status as a "big league" city. In the same 1970 letter to Roman Gribbs, Ford stated, "The City of Pontiac has evidenced an enthusiastic desire and willingness to finance the construction of a stadium there. While Detroit was our first choice, we must admit that we like the idea of a stadium available exclusively for football. We also like the Pontiac site because it will provide much needed parking facilities and easy accessibility for fans from all over the State."<sup>68</sup> As early as March 1969, Ford had questioned the available land space for a downtown stadium.<sup>69</sup> He was leaning heavily toward Pontiac in March 1970 because of the stalled progress and logistical problems associated with the downtown stadium project.

Although Ford favored the Pontiac plan, the mainstream press in Detroit continued to boost the idea of a downtown facility. The *Detroit Free Press* endorsed the DSWG's plan for the construction of a domed riverfront stadium. In an editorial piece from March 17, 1970, the *Free Press* staff claimed that "Detroit must accept the reality that symbols are important. The illusion that this is money that could or would be spent on other public services is not persuasive. This city must turn itself around, regain its confidence and build for the future." The editors believed professional sports teams and modern sports facilities were economic necessities, claiming that "so far as we are

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> "Southfield Leads Stadium Race," *Detroit Free Press*, 15 March 1969.

concerned, a part of building for the future is to make the heart of the city a place where people go and enjoy going ....The [stadium-building] committee has been bold. It is the city's turn now to be bold and get the domed stadium built."<sup>70</sup> The *Free Press* called on the stadium committee to act decisively in creating an important "symbol" for the city.

In the following weeks, the *Free Press* repeatedly voiced its support for the riverfront stadium project and stressed the consequences of a new stadium in Pontiac rather than downtown. Staff writer William Serrin warned that if a new stadium were built in Pontiac rather than Detroit, it "could well mean the end for Detroit as any sort of viable city....If it is defeated, the stadium could well be the last major construction project that could in any measurable degree improve the quality of life in Detroit." He also argued that a stadium "would bring an air of sophistication to a city that has long been noted, not unfairly, as a drab, dull, ugly town—the very symbol of the American factory town." Serrin acknowledged that funds were needed in several other areas, including hospitals, the police department, and housing, but the stadium issue brought Detroit's political elite together in a way that other issues could not.<sup>71</sup> Similar to many Detroiters, Serrin believed that a state-of-the-art stadium could improve Detroit's image, both locally and nationally.

The DSWG's stadium plans in March 1970 were major news in Detroit's mainstream press, but the city's black press paid no attention to stadium developments. On March 21, the *Detroit Free Press* ran a two-page story detailing the proposed stadium

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<sup>70</sup> "Riverfront Stadium Meets the Tests of Practicality," *Detroit Free Press*, 17 March 1970.

<sup>71</sup> William Serrin, "Downtown Stadium Could Save Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, 30 March 1970.

project.<sup>72</sup> However, the *Michigan Chronicle*, Detroit's black newspaper, did not even mention the stadium progress or the meeting between the DSWG and the Detroit Common Council. The *Chronicle* devoted its pages to issues such as inner-city neighborhood revitalization and improving the school system for black students. These urban problems were inextricably linked with the stadium plan. Detroit's leadership hoped that a massive project such as a downtown, domed stadium could revive the city's economy, while grassroots organizations and inner-city neighborhood leaders advocated several smaller development projects which could help small businesses and disadvantaged groups. On some occasions, the *Chronicle* included short paragraphs discussing a recent Tigers or Lions game, but the lack of coverage of the stadium debate reflected the minimal interest in the issue among the *Chronicle's* readers at that time.

Like the *Chronicle*, many citizens, especially those in riot-torn neighborhoods, believed that inner-city and racial issues facing Detroit were more important than a potential multi-million dollar stadium. The DSWG and city leaders understood that many Detroiters would not react kindly to any major burden on taxpayers (especially those with no interest in a new stadium) in order to finance construction. Therefore, the DSWG developed a preliminary financing plan that would generate most of the necessary funds through revenue bonds and "special taxes – levied primarily on those who would benefit most from the new stadium, i.e., event tickets, hotels, motels, restaurants, and parking facilities in the immediate vicinity of the stadium."<sup>73</sup> The DSWG and city

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<sup>72</sup> "City Council Hears Stadium Plans," *Detroit Free Press*, 21 March 1970.

<sup>73</sup> "A Multi-Purpose Domed Stadium for Downtown Detroit: A Report of the Downtown Stadium Working Group," 20 March 1970, Box 1, Folder 12, DEDC.



officials understood that Detroit's tax base was dwindling, and they could not afford to alienate those residents still living in the city.

Tigers owner and president John Fetzer also felt an obligation to Detroiters, and he continually expressed a desire to keep the Tigers in the city. After making his fortune through the creation and ownership of several radio stations throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Fetzer became a partial owner of the Tigers in 1956. Five years later he became the team's sole owner. Fetzer once stated that he saw himself as the team's guardian rather than its owner.<sup>74</sup> He claimed that the team belonged to the fans, which may explain his commitment to keeping the Tigers in Detroit, even though a more profitable situation may have existed elsewhere. Despite his dedication to the city, as the downtown plan progressed, Fetzer had some reservations about the West Cobo Hall site, particularly regarding possible parking and traffic issues. In June 1970, he hired his own architectural firm to develop a stadium plan for the general area of Tiger Stadium, which was still in the heart of Detroit but further inland and surrounded mainly by residential neighborhoods. The firm claimed that a stadium could be built in the Tiger Stadium neighborhood for nearly \$30 million less than on the riverfront.<sup>75</sup>

After examining Fetzer's proposal, Michael Cherry and the DSWG determined that up to three hundred families would be forced out of their homes if a new stadium

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<sup>74</sup> "Fetzer Paved the Road for Televised Prosperity," *National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum*, [http://web.baseballhalloffame.org/news/article.jsp?ymd=20071117&content\\_id=5424&vkey=hof\\_news](http://web.baseballhalloffame.org/news/article.jsp?ymd=20071117&content_id=5424&vkey=hof_news), Accessed March 17, 2014.

<sup>75</sup> "COMAC Company Inter-Office Memorandum from Michael Cherry to Donald Parsons," 23 June 1970, Box 1, Folder 8, DEDC.

were built near Tiger Stadium.<sup>76</sup> Detroit already had a significant housing problem for its black citizens. Many inner-city residents were displaced from their homes during highway construction and urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. Public housing projects in Detroit did little to help low-income minorities since these projects were already overcrowded and underfunded, and the 1967 riot brought national attention to economic inequality and extreme poverty in Detroit. Mayor Gribbs and the DSWG anticipated the public relations nightmare that would ensue if residents were removed from their homes unnecessarily. Further, the Detroit Housing Commission was in the process of approving a neighborhood development plan for the area, and the proposed stadium had ten thousand fewer seats than the riverfront project. The stadium committee concluded that the riverfront stadium was more economically feasible and would not displace any citizens from their homes since the area was entirely commercial.<sup>77</sup>

Detroit's stadium planners understood that citizens might be skeptical of a multi-million dollar civic stadium when the city faced such dire economic circumstances. As plans progressed for the downtown stadium, the DSWG issued public reports that touted the benefits of a new stadium to the entire city. One such report, issued in June 1970, claimed that "the stadium project is crucial to the revitalization of Detroit."<sup>78</sup> Another DSWG report from October of the same year argued that "a downtown Detroit stadium site is important because of the great economic impact involved. Such a facility could literally help save this city. After all, it is expected that the new stadium will bring one or

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<sup>76</sup> "Detroit DSWG Special Report," 14 August 1970, Box 1, Folder 12, DEDC.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

two new hotels to the city, motels, restaurants, and will stimulate development of high-rise office and apartment buildings. It would also bring an air of sophistication to a...drab, dull, unexciting town. All of this would mean that downtown spending would be greatly increased—at least \$40 million a year!—meaning greatly increased production of state and city revenues.”<sup>79</sup> Cherry and the other DSWG officials emphasized not only the economic benefits of a new downtown stadium, but also the opportunity for Detroit to transform itself from a depressed, post-industrial, Rust Belt town to a vibrant, modern city.

The stadium committee also addressed concerns among Detroiters that the stadium project was taking away needed funds for upgrades in schools, hospitals, and housing. In an October 1970 report, the DSWG argued that the stadium project was “an economic stimulator and a major investment for downtown Detroit... which will generate construction of additional facilities such as major hotels, restaurants, high rise office and apartment buildings, and other commercial enterprises. The total economic impact on our City will be measured in billions of dollars which will reflect in thousands of new job opportunities, an increasing tax base, and an increasing downtown population.” The report claimed that these gains “in turn help make it possible to pay for the much needed housing, hospitals, schools, police security, street lighting and other facilities and services that have been deteriorating during recent years.”<sup>80</sup> According to the most avid supporters of the downtown stadium, all areas of the city would benefit from its construction, not just William Clay Ford and John Fetzer.

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<sup>79</sup> “Detroit DSWG Special Report,” 8 October 1970, Box 1, Folder 12, DEDC.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Some of Detroit's business leaders agreed that downtown redevelopment would benefit the entire region. Many of those leaders were directly involved with the stadium planning process, either as part of the DSWG or the Chamber of Commerce. But even those without clear connections to the project over the past several years hoped to attach themselves in some way, realizing that the downtown stadium had potential for generating great profits. In May, the power company Detroit Edison announced plans for an office-residential-commercial complex just southeast of the Fisher/Lodge interchange, a short walk from the West Cobo Hall site. Detroit Edison chairman Walter Cisler envisioned a shopping center, pedestrian walkways, and ample parking facilities to create a complex that was "completely harmonized" with its surrounding neighborhood. Cisler had high hopes for the project, claiming that "no other city in the United States has such a unique piece of land available for development with easy pedestrian access to the core of its central business district and with direct vehicle access to interstate highways."<sup>81</sup> In this instance, the creation of downtown highways contributed directly to investment in the central business district, although Cisler and others continued to ignore the detrimental effects that highway construction had on inner city neighborhoods.

The DSWG's progress in developing a coherent plan had apparently impressed William Clay Ford. Just a few months earlier, he announced that he had reached a preliminary agreement with the city of Pontiac, but in September 1970, he said he was pleased with the progress that the DSWG had made, particularly in addressing the parking situation. Ford's approval, even though he still had not ended his discussions

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<sup>81</sup> *Detroit*, Published by the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, 11 May 1970, DEDC collection, Box 5 Folder 9.

with Pontiac, gave Detroit leaders confidence that they could eventually convince him to keep the Lions in Detroit. In its September report, the DSWG stated, “If all goes well we can break ground for stadium construction within six to eight months. With this kind of schedule and the cooperation we’re receiving, the fall of 1974 promises to be an exciting season in Detroit.”<sup>82</sup>

The optimism of the September report was short-lived. On October 27, 1970, despite Ford’s public statements commending the progress of the DSWG, the Lions announced that they had reached a preliminary agreement with the City of Pontiac for the construction and leasing of a new football stadium. Detroit officials were stunned. Overnight, the Lions were on the verge of signing an irrevocable contract with Pontiac. The Wayne County Stadium Authority (WCSA), which evolved from the DSWG and which the Michigan legislature established in June 1970 to oversee the acquisition of land on the riverfront for the downtown project, feared the potential loss of one of its two major tenants. Thomas Adams, chairman of the WCSA, asked William Clay Ford to give the WCSA a letter indicating the Lions’ interest in the downtown stadium, providing that the time schedule for the downtown stadium is similar to the schedule in the Pontiac agreement, the Lions’ stadium requirements are met, and a long-term lease agreement can be negotiated.<sup>83</sup>

Ford rejected a definite letter of interest. He explained to Adams that the Lions’ interest in the construction of a stadium within the Detroit city limits “is evidenced by the

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<sup>82</sup> “Detroit DSWG Special Report, 2 September 1970, Box 1, Folder 12, DEDC.

<sup>83</sup> “Letter from Thomas B. Adams, chairman of WCSA, to W.C. Ford,” 6 November 1970, Box 4, Folder 11, DEDC.

fact that our agreement with the City of Pontiac and the City of Pontiac Stadium Building Authority...contains, at our insistence, an escape clause which permits us for a limited time to terminate our obligation to Pontiac if satisfactory progress is being made toward the completion of a suitable Detroit stadium.”<sup>84</sup> Ford was unconvinced that the riverfront proposal was practical, primarily because of problems associated with traffic and parking. Ford argued that revised plans and new information “developed by your architects, engineers and other experts may serve to resolve these doubts. However, unless or until that happens, our doubts are too serious to permit us to give you a statement of interest to be used by you for fundraising purposes.”<sup>85</sup> Even after several months of progress in developing a feasible downtown stadium plan, Ford refused to give his unconditional support to the project. He seemed much more interested in the Pontiac plan but did not want to anger Detroit citizens by saying so publicly.

On the other hand, Detroit Tigers owner John Fetzer was eager to finalize plans and begin construction on the downtown site. Unlike Ford, Fetzer was fully committed to the fans within the city. He provided the WCSA with a letter of interest in the plan, explaining that the Tigers “understand the necessity of stated interest on the part of the prospective principal tenants of the facility to expedite the financing and organization of necessary start-up activities preliminary to obtaining land purchase agreement and schematic architectural design for the stadium.” He continued, “Knowing that our expressed interest as a principal prospective tenant will be helpful, if not mandatory, in

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<sup>84</sup> “Letter from WC Ford to Thomas Adams,” 23 Nov 1970, Box 4, Folder 11, DEDC.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

making these necessary preliminary steps possible, we are pleased to indicate this interest to you herewith.”<sup>86</sup>

Throughout 1970, the DSWG and the WCSA studied the viability of construction of a downtown stadium and the possible benefits to the downtown area as well as the entire metropolitan region. In January 1971, the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), the consulting firm hired by the DSWG, issued its final report on the “Feasibility of a Domed Stadium in Downtown Detroit.” SRI determined that “the effects of new income generation and sales from stadium construction would be widespread within the Detroit metropolitan area and would benefit many different types of businesses.” The report stressed the direct benefits to businesses in the downtown area near the stadium, stating that “land values adjacent to the stadium will tend to increase, the construction of new hotels and other businesses directly serving the stadium complex will occur, and increased economic activity will benefit other types of businesses.”<sup>87</sup> The report also echoed statements that Mayor Gribbs and other Detroit leaders made regarding the region-wide economic benefits of a new downtown riverfront stadium. The report concluded that “with new office building construction, improvement of access and parking, and possibly with the addition of as many as 10,000 new residential units downtown during the next two decades, the proposed stadium will contribute to the

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<sup>86</sup> “Letter from John Fetzer, president of Detroit Tigers, to the Commissioners of WCSA,” 10 December 1970, Box 4, Folder 11, DEDC.

<sup>87</sup> “Feasibility of a Domed Stadium in Downtown Detroit, Final Report,” January 1971, Box 1, Folder 12, DEDC.

stimulation of a more viable downtown area and social progress of the metropolitan region.”<sup>88</sup>

Detroit leaders believed that the final report addressed the fears and concerns of William Clay Ford. Throughout 1970, Ford stated that he needed proof that progress was being made on the downtown project. He previously expressed doubts over the DSWG’s ability to develop a viable plan, but the final report concluded that the downtown plan would be successful and profitable.

### **1971: Ford’s Decision and Its Effect on the Downtown Stadium Plan**

The final report, however, had little effect on Ford’s final decision. On February 2, 1971, he announced that the Lions had signed an agreement with the City of Pontiac for the construction and leasing of a football-only stadium. Ford’s announcement made the front page in the *Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News*. A major reason for the move, according to a Lions spokesman, was that the Lions’ fan base was “out there [in Pontiac], not on the waterfront....We’re a metropolitan area team. Our fans come from all over this area, from all over Michigan.”<sup>89</sup> Ford did not feel obligated to keep the Lions in Detroit since many of the team’s fans lived outside Detroit anyway.

Ford’s stance regarding his commitment to the city stood in stark contrast to that of John Fetzer. Ford’s loyalty was to the southeast Michigan region rather than the city of Detroit. White flight was perhaps more prevalent in Detroit than in any city in America. Since the 1940s, white Detroiters fled the central city in large numbers for the more affluent and racially homogenous suburbs. Between 1950 and 1980, Detroit lost

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> “Lions to Move to Pontiac,” *Detroit Free Press*, 2 Feb 1971.



approximately 465,000 residents, mostly to surrounding suburbs.<sup>90</sup> By 1971, many Lions fans drove into the city from the suburbs to watch games at Tiger Stadium. Therefore, Ford believed that the Lions had no strict allegiance to Detroit over any other city in the region.

Some in the mainstream press were angry with Ford's decision. Many, however, acknowledged that he had the right to take his business wherever he liked. Joe Falls, sports editor for the *Detroit Free Press*, wrote that "William Clay Ford owns the Detroit Lions and he can take them where he well pleases," but "it'll be interesting to see if he has the gall to keep the name 'Detroit Lions,' when his franchise won't be within 20 miles of the city limits." Falls also claimed that he did not "think a downtown stadium will do much at all to solve the problems of our city, and in this respect I agree with Ford almost 100 percent."<sup>91</sup> Falls was one of the few mainstream journalists to question the economic and psychological benefits that a new stadium could bring to Detroit.

The *Free Press* acknowledged that the loss of the Lions was a major blow to the city, but it also tried to dispel any rumors that Ford's decision to move the Lions out of town meant the eventual end of Detroit as a major city. In an editorial, the paper stated that the downtown project "had become a symbol of this city's earnest effort to salvage itself, to pull itself together and make the central city the healthy core of a healthy metro area. It was to be the abiding monument to Detroit's ability to join together for a worthwhile civic enterprise." Although the loss of the Lions was an obvious setback for

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<sup>90</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 139.

<sup>91</sup> Joe Falls, "Downtown Stadium? You Can Forget It," *Detroit Free Press*, 3 Feb 1971.

Detroit, “the city will survive, as it has survived other blows.”<sup>92</sup> Whether the press truly believed this is debatable, but the *Free Press* felt that it had an obligation to keep the city’s hopes up and tout other community revitalization efforts.

After William Clay Ford made his final decision to move the Lions to Pontiac, the black press finally acknowledged the downtown stadium issue. The *Michigan Chronicle* voiced the concerns of black Detroiters over the loss of the Lions to the suburbs. The *Chronicle* found that most of its readers wanted the Lions to remain in Detroit. One woman could not make the trip to Pontiac because of her age, while another reader who often attended Lions games at Tiger Stadium would not be able to go to Pontiac because he did not have a car.<sup>93</sup> These individuals represented many inner-city residents who either could not afford to drive to Pontiac or had no way of getting there. Ford’s decision to move the Lions was yet another blow toward Detroit’s efforts to rebuild its crumbling economy.

A *Chronicle* editorial from February 20 expressed anger toward Ford for abandoning Detroit and its working-class residents. The paper argued that “the vitality of the whole state hinges on the economic well-being of its largest city. Mr. Ford’s decision to move his Lions to suburbia would could [sic] have serious economic and psychological effects for his hometown.”<sup>94</sup> The article excoriated Ford for his lack of foresight and loyalty, stating that it “seems to us inconceivable that a member of the Ford family, which is so closely identified with the Motor City, would arbitrarily yank his

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<sup>92</sup> “Lions May Be Displaced But Not Detroit’s Future,” *Detroit Free Press*, 3 Feb 1971.

<sup>93</sup> “Ford Thumbs Nose at Inner City Fans?” *Michigan Chronicle*, 20 Feb 1971.

<sup>94</sup> “The Pontiac Lions? Spare Us, Mr. Ford,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 20 Feb 1971.

football team out of the city, thus dealing it a blow which it can ill afford.”<sup>95</sup> The *Chronicle* did not explicitly state that it believed race to be a major factor in Ford’s decision, but some of the city’s readers surely felt a racial element to the decision because of Detroit’s long history of racial problems and the recent movement of thousands of whites to the suburbs.

Ford’s announcement also devastated and angered Detroit officials. Many believed that their progress on the riverfront project was enough to convince Ford to sign an agreement with the city of Detroit. Nelis J. Saunders, a state representative whose district covered a portion of Detroit’s inner city, wrote a letter to Ford expressing his “shock as a citizen of the City of Detroit” and his “indignation as a Detroit legislator” at Ford’s decision to move the Lions to Pontiac. Saunders, like many Detroiters, could not believe that Ford would turn his back on the city. Saunders continued to condemn Ford for dealing “a critical blow to plans for the downtown stadium project and a serious setback to our efforts to revitalize the heart of Detroit.... Construction of the riverfront stadium would carry many benefits in the form of new hotels, restaurants, shops, and related business, all of which would pump new money and vitality into downtown Detroit and the central city. The possible loss of this stadium due to your decision would be a terrible injury to a city, which in so many ways, is linked with your family name.”<sup>96</sup> Saunders’s feelings mirrored those of the many people who devoted so much time and energy to the riverfront stadium project.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “Letter from Nelis J. Saunders, State Rep., 11<sup>th</sup> District,” 5 February 1971, Box 4, Folder 11, DEDC.

Ford, however, felt confident that he made the correct decision. He assured James Wineman, a DSWG committee member, that his decision “was dictated not by my heart but by my conscience; not by impulse but by sound, hard and logical reasoning,” explaining that he was “sincerely concerned about our city and particularly its downtown-area problems. That is one reason I was happy to approve the \$100,000 donated by the Ford Motor Company to the Renaissance Committee.<sup>97</sup> He expressed reservations about the profitability of a new stadium downtown, saying that he continually voiced these concerns to the WCSA, as well as his “continual doubts as to access routes, adequate parking, land acquisition and realistic financing of such an enormous project.”<sup>98</sup> He also refused to accept blame for the surprise of the announcement. Ford argued that he made the DSWG aware of his reservations for several months. They should have prepared for the possibility of the Lions moving to Pontiac.<sup>99</sup>

While Ford made his final decision to move the Lions, John Fetzer continued to express his support for the downtown stadium plan. The Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce voiced their appreciation for Fetzer’s continued support, despite the many economic problems that continued to plague the downtown area. The Chamber acknowledged and agreed with Fetzer’s concerns about America’s major urban centers and the problems which needed to be solved, including “the inadequacy of housing, economic deterioration of central business districts, etc. His comments included Detroit

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<sup>97</sup> The Renaissance Committee was private, non-profit organization established after the 1967 riot. It was established to stimulate business development in Detroit, particularly downtown; Letter from W.C. Ford to James Wineman, member of DSWG,” 5 February 1971, Box 4, Folder 11, DEDC.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

and a fine appreciation of the specifics of these problems as they confront Detroit leadership today.”<sup>100</sup> Fetzer felt a responsibility to contribute to the revitalization of downtown. He expressed concern over where the money would come from to rebuild the area. As the Chamber talked with Fetzer about Detroit, it was clear that he felt that it is private enterprise needed to “lead the way in pumping new life into and bringing stability to metropolitan centers.”<sup>101</sup>

In addition to the construction of a new stadium and the direct economic benefits expected to accompany it, Mayor Roman Gribbs wanted to use the riverfront stadium area to enhance the physical beauty of downtown. In March 1971, he stated his desire to acquire land along the river for the expansion of the Civic Center Riverfront Park. He explained that a tree-filled park along the riverfront “would provide the public with expanded opportunities to enjoy access to the greatest natural resource of our City. Incidentally, such a park development would provide a handsome setting for the stadium and provide even more incentive for year-round use of the area.”<sup>102</sup> Gribbs, along with other Detroit leaders, believed that enhancing the physical beauty of the riverfront area could serve as an example for the revitalization of other areas of the city, especially the riot-torn areas of the inner city.

The problems that Detroit faced in its efforts to implement the downtown stadium project were not confined to the city. In March 1971, Pontiac and Oakland County

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<sup>100</sup> “Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce Memorandum from Dwight Havens and Bob Sweany to Roman Gribbs, Max Fisher, Tom Adams, and Tom Reid,” 8 February 1971, Box 4, Folder 15, DEDC.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> “Letter from Mayor Roman Gribbs to Thomas Adams, Chairman, WCSA,” 22 March 1971, Box 2, Folder 17, DEDC.

planners determined that the Pontiac stadium plan could cause “traffic-clogged roads, over-used sanitation facilities and a serious threat to the environment of a large section of Oakland County surrounding the M-59 and Opdyke Road site.” Throughout the 1960s, as greater numbers of Detroiters fled the city, suburban roads and highways faced many of the same traffic problems as the urban center. However, planners remained optimistic that “with careful and detailed planning...most of the problems such a facility will bring can be overcome and... Pontiac’s domed stadium could become a model for the nation.”<sup>103</sup>

In August 1971, after more than two years of research and planning, chairman Thomas Adams and the Wayne County Stadium Authority developed a finalized plan for the downtown domed stadium, including the “architectural design, real estate, parking, streets and traffic and financing programs.”<sup>104</sup> Soon after, they presented the Detroit Tigers with a proposed agreement, outlining the major commitments of each party. After nearly three years of studies, proposals, and committee meetings, Detroit had a definite plan for a new multi-purpose, state-of-the-art stadium that officials believed would contribute to the revival of the downtown business district.

The mainstream press in Detroit described city leaders’ excitement over the possibilities that a revitalized downtown could bring to the city. In a *Detroit News* article, Adams exclaimed that “the proposed domed multisport stadium is just what Detroit needs ‘to pull it together, stop blight and decay and provide much needed income,

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<sup>103</sup> Michael P. Wendland, “Planners wary of proposed Pontiac stadium,” *Detroit News*, 25 March 1971.

<sup>104</sup> “Letter to John Fetzer from Thomas Adams, Chairman, WCSA,” 17 August 1971, Box 4, Folder 11, DEDC.

jobs and taxes.”<sup>105</sup> Despite losing the Lions to Pontiac, Adams and the WCSA continued to stress the benefits of a new stadium and its potential uses, both for the Tigers and for other events such as high school and college sporting events, concerts, and circuses.

At the same time, the press in Pontiac also stressed the benefits that a stadium and a professional football team would bring to the community, but they understood that the issue of stadium financing should be left to the public. *The Pontiac Press* argued that “the Pontiac Stadium Authority has passed an important milestone in its effort to build a stadium here. It has announced its intent to sell \$41 million in bonds to finance the project. We support a local stadium and hope that one is built. Due to the nature of the financing, however, it would be wise at this point to give Pontiac citizens a direct vote on the question.”<sup>106</sup> Supporters of the stadium easily outnumbered its detractors in Pontiac, since most citizens looked to the statewide and national recognition that a professional football team could bring.

By late 1971, the stadium picture in Detroit was starting to come into focus. William Clay Ford made the decision to move his team to Pontiac, delighting many suburbanites while angering Detroiters who felt he was turning his back on the Motor City. Moving the Lions to Pontiac gave downtown stadium planners a new opportunity to work primarily with Tigers owner John Fetzer on a riverfront stadium without having to consider the demands of William Clay Ford and Lions’ management. From the late 1960s to February 1971, Ford continually expressed his frustration over the lack of progress on the stadium issue, but Fetzer seemed much more optimistic about a

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<sup>105</sup> “Stadium called a builder of pride,” *Detroit News*, 15 Sept 1971.

<sup>106</sup> “We Support a City Election on Stadium-Building Issue,” *The Pontiac Press*, 29 Sept 1971.

downtown ballpark, as long as he was properly compensated for moving out of Tiger Stadium. Although Ford's decision seemed like a significant setback, it helped streamline the decision-making process on the riverfront stadium project and provided a clearer idea of the type of stadium that would be built downtown.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### “BOON OR BOONDOGGLE?”: OPPOSITION GROUPS FIGHT BACK AGAINST RIVERFRONT STADIUM PLAN

William Clay Ford's agreement with Pontiac was devastating to the Wayne County Stadium Authority and the supporters of a downtown, riverfront stadium. Ford placed increasing pressure on the WCSA to come up with a definitive plan for financing and constructing the riverfront stadium project. In May 1970, as Robert Sweany began his tenure as executive director of the Downtown Stadium Working Group, his DSWG colleague, Thomas Adams, recommended that Sweany not even make introductions to the rest of the group since there was so much work to be done in a short time. Adams hoped the other members would “understand the urgency for putting Bob to work right away,” because of Ford's demands for a solid stadium plan.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately for the WCSA, however, their lack of progress and Ford's seeming determination to keep his team from moving downtown led to the devastating news in February 1971 that the Detroit Lions were moving to Pontiac after four decades in the Motor City. Adams and his WCSA colleagues now were left to figure out how to continue with the riverfront stadium project after losing one of their two main tenants.

Some stadium boosters held out hope that William Clay Ford would change his mind regarding the Pontiac decision, but realistically, most supporters of the Detroit

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<sup>1</sup> “Memo from Tom Adams to All Members of the DSWG and Advisors,” 27 May 1970, Roman Gribbs Mayoral Records, Box 31 Folder 4, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, MI.

riverfront stadium understood that after Ford signed the agreement with Pontiac in February 1971, the facility's sole main tenant would be John Fetzer's Detroit Tigers. Therefore, strategic plans shifted to the creation of a multi-purpose, municipal stadium designed primarily for baseball. Other types of events were considered when developing plans for the stadium and surrounding area, but no decisions were made with the intention of convincing Ford to keep the Lions in Detroit.

In some ways, Detroit's difficulties in planning and constructing a municipal stadium were not unlike the challenges other cities faced when planning similar projects. Civic leaders in Philadelphia worked for nearly two decades to rally public support for a new ballpark to replace the decaying Connie Mack Stadium, home of baseball's Philadelphia Phillies. The City Planning Commission vetoed the original plan in 1954, in part due to the lackluster attendance at Phillies games for the past several years.<sup>2</sup> A decade later, in 1964, the Philadelphia City Council agreed to put the bond issue for the proposed stadium to a vote after a South Philadelphia location for the stadium had been agreed upon by the Phillies ownership and city leaders. A group of concerned citizens filed suit to prevent the issue from being voted upon, but the suit was dismissed, and voters supported the \$25 million bond issue.<sup>3</sup> Rising production costs led to another referendum in 1967 to approve an additional \$13 million bond issue, which narrowly

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<sup>2</sup> Rich Westcott, *Veterans Stadium: Field of Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

passed. Despite these hurdles and opposition from a significant portion of the electorate, Veterans Stadium hosted its first game in April 1971.<sup>4</sup>

Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium, which opened in 1970 and was home to baseball's Reds and the NFL's Bengals, was also the result of two decades of planning and political maneuvering. When the concept of a riverfront facility was suggested in the late 1940s, few Cincinnati residents supported the idea of a stadium along the Ohio River. These residents believed that the entire riverfront area was an eyesore and was beyond repair.<sup>5</sup> A civic club, the Cincinnati Association, thought that the riverfront location provided an opportunity to educate residents on the history of Cincinnati and the importance of the Ohio River in the city's historical development. One of the local newspapers, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, also supported the idea of a riverfront facility, and public sentiment slowly shifted throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, as other cities throughout the United States were developing their own plans for modern, technologically advanced, municipal stadiums.<sup>6</sup> Citizens approved a \$6.6 million bond issue in 1962, and five years later, city and county officials agreed to underwrite \$42 million in construction bonds without any notable opposition among Cincinnati and Hamilton County residents.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the cities throughout the country that approved construction of municipal stadiums during this period also faced similar structural problems as Detroit. Cities like

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<sup>4</sup> Westcott, *Veterans Stadium*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 77.

<sup>6</sup> Trumpbour, *The New Cathedrals*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh garnered support among their respective electorates for stadium funding within a post-industrial period that saw each city lose significant portions of their tax bases as jobs and citizens moved outside the central cities. Many of these cities faced backlash from citizens as they cleared substandard or dilapidated neighborhoods in the hope of industrial renewal.<sup>8</sup> This period also brought public attention to deep racial divides as white residents used violent means to prevent racial integration of their neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup>

In some ways, however, Detroit faced challenges unique to those of many other American cities. Detroit's long-standing reputation as the Motor City fell apart during the 1950s and 1960s as deindustrialization and federal policies shifted automobile production and residents out of the city and into the suburbs.<sup>10</sup> The automobile industry was so central to Detroit's economy and international reputation that the decline of the industry during the 1950s led to what Thomas Sugrue described as "a systemic restructuring of the local economy from which the city never fully recovered."<sup>11</sup> Other cities, like Pittsburgh, faced similar crises as the industries for which they were best

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<sup>8</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 164-5.

<sup>9</sup> On the history of urban racial segregation in the postwar period, attempts at desegregation, and white neighborhood resistance, see Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction Against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 551-78; Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Hirsch, "Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953-1966," *Journal of American History* 82 (1995), 522-50; Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 125-52; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 190-218.

<sup>11</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 126.

known gradually moved out because of various economic, political, and racial developments, but most American urban areas had more diverse economies than Detroit and adapted better to the post-industrial landscape after World War II.

Detroit had an even more noticeable problem after 1967. The July 1967 riot that led to forty-three deaths and millions of dollars in property damage destroyed the city's reputation and brought its volatile racial history to the forefront of public debate. In this aftermath, Detroiters became more vocal in their disapproval and distrust toward civic leadership and law enforcement. Sidney Fine explains that the number of black Detroiters willing to publicly air their grievances rose considerably after the riot because these citizens "now expected their complaints to 'lead to action.'"<sup>12</sup> Also following the riot, leaders such as Jerome Cavanagh, Roman Gribbs, Henry Ford II, and Thomas Adams initiated construction projects and development plans to stimulate a "Detroit Renaissance," hoping to strengthen the local economy and provide specific buildings, facilities, and landmarks that could symbolize the city's resurgence. Adams, the Wayne County Stadium Authority, and stadium boosters hoped that a modern, riverfront facility could serve as an example of Detroit's continued status as a vibrant American city.

### **Construction Costs and Financing Issues Delay Stadium Progress**

The most notable sign that both the Tigers and the WCSA were committed to the riverfront stadium partnership was the forty-year lease that both sides signed in January 1972. Following the signing of the lease, Mayor Roman Gribbs somewhat naively exclaimed, "This is a historic day for Detroit... We are going to have that stadium.

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<sup>12</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 454.

Everything from now on is merely a matter of mechanics.”<sup>13</sup> The lease terms were more favorable to Fetzer and the Tigers than the WCSA’s original estimate. Fetzer had recently expressed concern that the city would not be able to adequately compensate him for leaving Tiger Stadium, which Fetzer and Cavanagh had discussed in the early planning stages for the stadium nearly a decade before.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Adams revised the terms of the lease to persuade Fetzer to sign. Under the lease, the city was projected to bring in \$640,000 less in revenue per year. WCSA chairman Thomas Adams claimed that the revenue shortfall would be made up through lower bond interest rates and “miscellaneous revenue.” For a city still suffering from the economic and psychological effects of the 1967 riot, any potential financial deficits were a primary concern. Adams assured concerned citizens that “we expect to get as much as we projected, but we’re going to get it in a different way.”<sup>15</sup> Ticket revenues were expected to make up for the less favorable lease terms as well, as Fetzer and the WCSA declared that ticket prices at the riverfront stadium would average one dollar more per seat than a similar seat at Tiger Stadium.<sup>16</sup>

One factor that supporters of the riverfront stadium neglected to discuss publicly was the rising cost of construction and the fact that the burden to pay for cost overruns rested with Wayne County taxpayers. In late February 1972, the WCSA announced that they would purchase the riverfront stadium land for \$12 million. In previous statements

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<sup>13</sup> “Tigers Sign 40-Year Lease for Stadium on Riverfront,” *Detroit Free Press*, 13 Jan 1972.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from John Fetzer to Tom Adams, 7 Jan 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 4 Folder 17.

<sup>15</sup> “Stadium Bond Rate to Offset Shortage in Tigers’ Lease,” *Detroit Free Press*, 15 Jan 1972.

<sup>16</sup> “New Stadium to Hike Tiger Tickets,” *Detroit Free Press*, 28 Jan 1972.

regarding the stadium plan, Thomas Adams and WCSA officials claimed that the cost of land would be paid by a private developer. However, when no developer could be found who was willing to make the investment, that cost shifted to the WCSA, and officials decided to pay for the added cost through a lower-than-expected interest rate (how they planned on achieving this was not explained) and by dipping into the reserve fund for potential overage costs for the project.<sup>17</sup> Any costs incurred after reserve funds were used would have been paid through the county's general fund.<sup>18</sup> The stadium authority had to get approval from the Wayne County Board of Commissioners in order to purchase the land, but most members of the board supported the idea of a riverfront stadium for several years, so receiving approval from the board seemed like a formality.

The rising cost of construction created another wrinkle to the stadium debate. Stadium proponents argued that delays in construction would lead to even greater costs, meaning that the riverfront plan should be approved quickly in order to save money in the long run. This was one of the main sources of frustration for William Clay Ford during the late 1960s, as the project was stalled by disagreements over the location and design of the facility. In 1969, Ford warned, "The slow pace of the [Downtown Stadium] Working Group causes us great concern, because we are told by people in the construction industry that the cost of building a new, modern stadium facility is increasing at the rate of approximately \$40,000 to \$50,000 a day."<sup>19</sup> The longer the project was delayed in its

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<sup>17</sup> "Cost of Land Added to City Stadium Plans," *Detroit Free Press*, 18 Feb 1972.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Ford to Tom Adams, 11 December 1969, Box 75 Folder 16, Roman Gribbs Mayoral Records, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, MI.

planning stages, the more its total costs, and the less likely Detroiters and Wayne County residents would be to approve such a proposal.

The local press largely supported the WCSA's plan to purchase the riverfront development land, even with the potential financial burden that the county would face if unforeseen costs drove up the total cost of the stadium project. On February 24, a *Detroit Free Press* editorial claimed that the land purchase was "a necessary move to get the authority into the bond market in time to make substantial savings," referring to a recent lowering of bond interest rates. Further, the editorial warned that "the authority cannot afford to wait longer for an angel....If it moves now on floating the \$126 million bond issue it can effect savings immediately of \$4 million and interest savings over the period of the bond issue of \$40 million."<sup>20</sup> In a March 23 editorial, the *Free Press* implored Detroiters to support the stadium as an important symbol of the city's future. "There should be something happening in the city which is not a project of sheer desperation. Something new. Something that indicates there is a spirit that looks beyond Detroit's present mess and is impelling the community toward something fresh and exciting."<sup>21</sup>

The riverfront stadium was one of a few major development projects in the planning stages in Detroit during the early 1970s. The 1967 riot was still fresh in the minds of Detroiters, and civic leaders hoped construction would provide economic benefits for the city and serve as concrete and steel symbols of the city's perseverance. In March 1970, Thomas Adams declared, "The stadium, with all the opportunities it can provide for adjacent commercial development, can stand as a highly visible symbol of the

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<sup>20</sup> "A Step Toward the Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 24 Feb 1972.

<sup>21</sup> "The Case for the Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 Mar 1972.



determination of Detroit and its people to move forward with demonstrated confidence. The stadium may be the most important and timely thing we have ever done for the future of our city.”<sup>22</sup> Other projects had a similar intent. Detroit Renaissance, Inc., a coalition of business leaders in Detroit, created a development plan for the Elmwood neighborhood on the near east side. Led by Henry Ford II and Joseph L. Hudson, founder of Hudson’s Department Stores, the members of Detroit Renaissance hoped that reviving inner city neighborhoods could revitalize downtown in the process.<sup>23</sup> A *Free Press* editorial in June 1972 argued that “Detroit will never be renewed merely by the physical rebuilding of the central business district; indeed, the vitality of the business district itself may depend more on the renewal and revival of close-in neighborhoods than on the construction of new office space.”<sup>24</sup> One of the consequences of the Renaissance plan was the razing of housing and commercial buildings deemed to be substandard, giving black Detroiters even more evidence that their voices were not being heard, even after the 1967 riot. But Roman Gribbs, Thomas Adams, Henry Ford II, and other civic leaders continued forward with these major development projects in order to revive the local economy and improve Detroit’s national image.

As expected, on February 24, 1972, the Wayne County Board of Commissioners approved a proposed \$12 million land purchase by the WCSA.<sup>25</sup> About a week later, on

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<sup>22</sup> News Release from Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, 20 March 1970, Roman Gribbs Mayoral Collection, Box 75 Folder 18.

<sup>23</sup> June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 154.

<sup>24</sup> “Renaissance Plan Promises Real Revival for Detroit,” *Detroit Free Press*, 10 June 1972.

<sup>25</sup> “\$12 Million OKd for Stadium Land,” *Detroit Free Press*, 25 Feb 1972.

March 2, the Board of Commissioners approved the issuance of \$126 million in stadium bonds by a vote of twenty to four. Commissioners approved the bond issuance despite a report earlier that day by the Wayne County Board of Auditors which declared the proposed reserve fund of \$2.6 million “insufficient for a project of the magnitude of the stadium.”<sup>26</sup> Once the reserve fund was used to cover costs, any additional costs would come from the county’s general fund, made up of property tax revenues. Therefore, Detroiters and residents of Wayne County became increasingly concerned that the stadium project could end up diverting money from more pressing needs, such as schools, roads, and hospitals.

Despite the confident declarations of Thomas Adams and WCSA officials, the stadium project was never on firm financial footing. Supporters and planners of the riverfront stadium claimed that the projected revenues and expenses were reliable, but in reality, some factors that were out of their control could affect the costs of the entire project. In April 1972, Moody’s Investors Service lowered the credit rating of Wayne County, in part because of the county’s backing of \$126 million in stadium bonds. A lower credit rating for the county would result in higher interest rates for bond issues and could lead to additional millions of dollars in interests over the life of the bonds.<sup>27</sup> Although WCSA officials likely could not have foreseen Moody’s decision to lower Wayne County’s credit rating, they undoubtedly understood that these types of variables affected the total cost of the stadium project despite their public statements that no additional money would be needed beyond the stadium reserve fund. A few days later,

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<sup>26</sup> “County Oks Issuing Stadium Bonds,” *Detroit Free Press*, 3 Mar 1972.

<sup>27</sup> “County is Protesting Rating on Credit for New Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 13 April 1972.

after county officials went to New York to protest the lower credit rating, Moody's raised Wayne County's rating one level, still below its original A-1 rating.<sup>28</sup>

Once the credit rating issue was resolved, the next step was to find investors willing to buy the \$126 million in stadium bonds at an interest rate favorable to the WCSA and its revenue projections. A national investment syndicate in New York purchased the bonds at 6.64 percent, which was close to the WCSA's estimate. Thomas Adams celebrated the stadium bond deal, exclaiming, "It's the culmination of three years of hard work by a lot of people."<sup>29</sup> The bond sale did not go unnoticed by executives in Major League Baseball. MLB commissioner Bowie Kuhn congratulated Adams and the WCSA on clearing such a significant hurdle, celebrating the fact that "the superb domed stadium in Detroit is now that much closer to reality. All of us in baseball are delighted."<sup>30</sup>

WCSA officials and stadium proponents seemed to have overwhelming support from the local press. The *Detroit Free Press* editorial staff continued to support stadium construction, arguing that it would have a positive effect on several different areas throughout the city and county. Just a few days after the announcement that a deal was made to sell the stadium bonds, a *Free Press* editorial acknowledged that "there will no doubt be a continuation of the public debate about whether the community should build a sports stadium at a time when other institutions are in financial trouble. None of the troubled areas would benefit from a failure to build the stadium. The money to build and

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<sup>28</sup> "County, Stadium Bonds Upgraded," *Detroit Free Press*, 18 April 1972.

<sup>29</sup> "Bonds Sold for Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 20 Apr 1972; "Stadium Groundbreaking Set for June," *Detroit*, 1 May 1972.

<sup>30</sup> Telegram from Bowie Kuhn to Thomas Adams, 19 April 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 4 Folder 15.

operate the stadium is coming from revenue bonds that will be paid from stadium income, from horse-racing revenues, and from a new tax on hotel and motel bills in Wayne County.” The editorial ignored the fact that horse racing revenues and hotel and motel taxes could be used on more pressing needs if they were not tied to the stadium project. Continuing its stadium boosterism, the editorial contended that “the stadium fits into a scheme of riverfront development that cannot help be a blessing to the community....The authority expects the stadium will be ready for the 1975 baseball season. That will be a great day for Detroit, whether the Tigers win or lose.”<sup>31</sup> Another editorial praised Thomas Adams and his WCSA colleagues as men “whose vision and commitment have brought the stadium project this close to reality. In a city of skeptics, he and his colleagues have shown that Detroit’s leadership can pull itself together and do a complicated, politically sensitive job....Tom Adams represents the can-do spirit that will turn Detroit around.”<sup>32</sup>

As one might expect, business leaders in Detroit wholeheartedly supported the plan to build a public, domed stadium on the downtown riverfront. Such a project would likely result in increased property values, at least in the short-term. In a February 1972 *Detroiter* magazine editorial, Dwight Havens, president of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, argued, “The Downtown Stadium is the single, most important project leading to a revitalization of downtown Detroit; and it is the catalyst that will get economic development underway on approximately 73 acres of land on Detroit’s

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<sup>31</sup> “The Stadium: Close to Reality,” *Detroit Free Press*, 22 Apr 1972.

<sup>32</sup> “Stadium Proves Detroit Can Meet Big Challenges,” *Detroit Free Press*, 14 Jan 1972.

riverfront west of Cobo Hall, and in areas adjacent to that site.”<sup>33</sup> Havens claimed that the domed facility would benefit the rest of the city as well, stating that it would “provide a welcome tax revenue source to the city, Wayne County and Michigan. The added annual flow of tax dollars to Detroit, for example, will help to provide the revenue needed to supply adequate, essential services for its citizens.”<sup>34</sup> Wayne County Commissioner Catherine Shavers of Detroit viewed the stadium as a “golden opportunity for a rebirth of the central city.”<sup>35</sup> Shavers also claimed that the riverfront facility would spur additional investment in downtown, and those resources could be used in residential areas throughout the city.<sup>36</sup> A common link between the public statements of these civic leaders is the belief that downtown investment would have a positive effect on all Detroiters in every neighborhood.

The riverfront stadium was not the only downtown development project in the works in Detroit during the 1970s. Henry Ford II, possibly noticing an opportunity to profit from the forthcoming riverfront stadium, announced a plan in 1972 for a multimillion dollar riverfront development project that included a 70-story hotel, office towers, and a shopping mall. Ford stated that the entire endeavor would cost between 400 million and 500 million dollars.<sup>37</sup> A few weeks later, in his press conference to

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<sup>33</sup> “Legislators Play Key Role in Detroit’s Future,” *Detroit*, 21 February 1972.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> “Commissioners’ Role Vital to Stadium,” *Detroit*, 17 April 1972.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> “Detroit and Pontiac Fight Like Lions and Tigers Over Who Plans Better Stadium for Lions and Tigers,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18 February 1972; “A Big Week for Downtown,” *Detroit Free Press*, 4 April 1972.

announce the largest commercial development plan in Detroit's history, Ford stated, "The riverfront development is no longer an exciting proposal....It is now a reality."<sup>38</sup> Mayor Roman Gribbs hoped the Ford project would spur other riverfront development ventures and lead to widespread support for the domed stadium plan.<sup>39</sup> The *Free Press* lauded Henry Ford II for deciding "to undertake the massive job of reversing the decline of the city with which his name is inextricably linked."<sup>40</sup> This seemed to be a not-so-subtle dig at Ford's nephew, William Clay Ford, who made the decision to take his business from Detroit to Pontiac just one year before.

The local press also supported a common view among urban planners and politicians that a healthy downtown was necessary in order for other areas of the city to thrive. Ford's riverfront development plan was lauded for its potential to revive neighborhoods throughout the entire city:

The point is frequently made these days that the city cannot afford to renew downtown at the expense of the neighborhoods, and we agree with it completely. But it is essential for the health of the whole city that the renewal of downtown, which also means the rebuilding of the tax base, continues apace, even as we seek better ways of improving neighborhoods....[The Ford development] will assist mightily in increasing the city's tax base.<sup>41</sup>

Ford could have chosen to invest directly in low income neighborhoods, but he—and other prominent Detroiters—believed that investment should begin with downtown and then filter into other areas of the city.

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<sup>38</sup> "Dazzling Riverfront Plan Bared by Ford," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 May 1972.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> "Ford's Dream for Detroit Bursts into Reality," *Detroit Free Press*, 24 May 1972.

<sup>41</sup> "A Big Week for Downtown," *Detroit Free Press*, 4 April 1972.

The riverfront stadium plan seemed to have the full support of the local press, but as details of the project became more well-known to the general public, opposing voices became more prominent. In March 1972, the Michigan Municipal Finance Commission (MFC), a subcommittee of the state legislature, expressed concern over the projected revenues that the WCSA had factored into its stadium financing plan. James F. Marling, director of the MFC, accused Adams and the WCSA of inflating baseball attendance figures in order to mislead taxpayers into supporting the stadium. Marling contended that “there’s nothing in recent Tiger history to indicate that the attendance projections...are valid. Nor does the experience at other stadiums indicate a potential for increased attendance for baseball in Detroit. In fact, a strong case can be made that the increased ticket price will have an adverse effect on attendance.”<sup>42</sup> Attendance figures are difficult to predict, and Marling made a valid point regarding the WCSA’s overly optimistic attendance projections, but the WCSA needed the support of the state legislature to avoid future delays in the construction of the riverfront stadium. Marling’s concerns needed to be addressed, even if stadium boosters disagreed with his assessment.

The Detroit Tigers organization, which stood to benefit more than anyone else from the potential downtown stadium and the favorable lease terms, tried to assure Marling that attendance figures would indeed rise dramatically in a new stadium, especially a domed facility. Jim Campbell, general manager of the Detroit Tigers, wrote Marling to document the effect of recently built stadiums on baseball attendance in several other cities. Campbell referenced the recent construction of Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, opened in 1971, in which the Philadelphia Phillies “finished dead last in

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<sup>42</sup> “Stadium Bond Plans Run into State Snag,” *Detroit Free Press*, 15 March 1972.

their division and set an all-time attendance record of 1,500,000 people and better than doubled their attendance of the previous year. Remember also that the Philadelphia stadium is not domed. It should also be noted that Philadelphia has never produced attendance figures anywhere near the records established in Detroit.”<sup>43</sup> It was likely that a new stadium in Detroit would lead to a rise in baseball attendance in its first season, much like Philadelphia, but the novelty of a new facility would be short-lived, and the WCSA projections estimated that attendance would outpace recent Tiger Stadium attendance throughout the life of the forty-year lease.

Other recently-opened stadiums in the United States saw initial increases in attendance compared to the final seasons in the old facilities. Attendance at Cincinnati Reds games nearly doubled between 1969, the last season at Crosley Field, and 1970, the first season at Riverfront Stadium. The Pittsburgh Pirates baseball club also benefited from their new facilities in 1970. In their final season at Forbes Field in 1969, about 770,000 spectators purchased tickets, while more than 1.3 million fans attended the first season at Three Rivers Stadium.<sup>44</sup> However, a winning team on the field was historically the most reliable way to increase attendance. No forty-year projections could guarantee that the Tigers would be competitive in each of those seasons.

Nevertheless, stadium supporters accused Marling of using the riverfront stadium plan to advance his political career. A WCSA official who attended a MFC meeting on March 15 contended that Marling was “trying to make a name for himself at the expense

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<sup>43</sup> Letter from Jim Campbell, Detroit Baseball Club, to James F. Marling, Director, Department of Treasury, Municipal Finance Commission (n.d.), DEDC Collection, Box 4 Folder 15.

<sup>44</sup> Baseball Attendance Records, Source: Lou Matlin, Detroit Baseball Club (n.d.), DEDC Collection, Box 4 Folder 16.



of the stadium.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than take a constructive approach to Marling’s criticism and have a useful debate over the merits of the stadium plan, the WCSA tried to dismiss any opposition to the project as politically motivated. For his part, Marling stated that it was his responsibility to report potential financial issues to the MFC “without having the stadium authority there just creating a rumpus.”<sup>46</sup>

Once again, the local media pledged its support to the WCSA and argued that its attendance projections were properly estimated “based on records from other new stadiums across the country. They show that an old team in a new stadium draws a crowd.”<sup>47</sup> This was usually true in the first year of a new facility, but WCSA projections estimated very little decrease in average baseball attendance over the first twenty years of the new stadium. The stadium authority predicted that in the first year, average Tigers game attendance would be 27,000, while twenty years later, that average would drop slightly to 25,000 spectators per game.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the *Free Press* supported these attendance estimates while imploring the WCSA to come to an agreement with the Municipal Finance Commission for the benefit of the city. The riverfront stadium was deemed too important as a symbol of progress, and the revenue it would develop could “prevent other facilities and services from crumbling. Just maintaining the quality of city

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<sup>45</sup> “Stadium Board Blasts State; Says Arena Won’t Falter,” *Detroit Free Press*, 16 March 1972.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> “Answers on the Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 18 March 1972.

<sup>48</sup> WCSA, Financial Projections for Proposed Stadium, May 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 5 Folder 5.

life is not enough. It must be enhanced by whatever means possible, and the stadium, with all its problems, is a decent step forward.”<sup>49</sup>

Most editorials by the *Free Press* staff throughout 1972 emphasized the potential benefits of the riverfront stadium and took the WCSA’s revenue and attendance projections at face value. However, as stadium opponents became more vocal in their calls against the use of public funds for the benefit of a private business, at least some journalists wondered whether a publicly-financed, domed riverfront stadium was a sound financial investment. One *Free Press* writer, in a March 20, 1972 editorial, theorized that the reasons so many public stadiums were built recently in America centered around America’s love of professional sports, the emphasis on downtown development to revive struggling cities, and the publicity campaigns that stadium promoters used to maintain widespread support for such projects.<sup>50</sup> The same writer acknowledged that “if the authority’s judgment [on projected attendance and revenue] is wrong, the stadium will be in trouble and the taxpayers of Wayne County will have to bail it out....But authority members feel their judgment is correct.”<sup>51</sup> The WCSA’s estimates, however, could only be proven incorrect after construction of the stadium was finished and taxpayers were bound to cover the deficits.

Some civic leaders outside of Detroit were happy to see the growing number of vocal opponents of the stadium plan. In a letter to the editor, Royce Smith, mayor of Belleville, a small town in western Wayne County, said, “It is heartwarming to me that at

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<sup>49</sup> “Answers on the Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 18 March 1972.

<sup>50</sup> “Can Stadium Make It Pay?” *Detroit Free Press*, 20 Mar 1972.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

least two state officials, James F. Marling, director of the Municipal Finance Commission, and Mrs. Maxine Virtue, assistant state attorney general, have had the common sense to point out the shortcomings and fallacies that were contained in the application submitted for approval for bonding the stadium.”<sup>52</sup> He continued, “My congratulations to these two public officials, who took the unpopular stand by pointing out some of the many fallacies surrounding the promotion of this stadium. My files are full of letters from people who oppose this stadium, and if ever the proposition was put to a vote of the people, I have no doubt as to what the outcome would be.”<sup>53</sup>

The citizens of Detroit and Wayne County had mixed reactions to the approved bond issue and the construction of a publicly-financed riverfront stadium. One concerned citizen who seemed to understand the history of stadium financing in other cities wondered, “How are the taxpayers going to carry the load? The stadium will not cost \$126 million; knowing how the politicians work, the stadium will cost \$140 to \$150 million. . . .No thank you, I want no part of it.”<sup>54</sup> Another lamented, “It would be a very foolish enterprise to build a stadium and use up all of that beautiful river frontage. A stadium would afford only seasonal entertainment for a minority of residents. Why can’t our leaders use this land to benefit all of the people? A beautiful park, some outdoor eating facilities, tennis courts, a marine etc. would be much more useful.”<sup>55</sup> Others recognized the need for a new baseball stadium and looked forward to the positive impact

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<sup>52</sup> “Stadium Bonding Request is Based on Fallacies,” *Detroit Free Press*, 21 March 1972.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> “The Stadium: Boon or Boondoggle?” *Detroit Free Press*, 8 April 1972.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

it could have on the community. Fred W. Johnson, in a letter to the *Free Press* editor, chided opponents of the riverfront stadium, arguing that “anyone with any amount of common sense knows that Detroit needs a new stadium. Tiger Stadium is not the Rock of Gibraltar....The new stadium would create jobs and use land instead of letting it lie idle.”<sup>56</sup> Individuals varied in their opinions on the potential construction project, but the debate was becoming more publicized throughout the first half of 1972 as preliminary plans were becoming more definite and the stadium itself was becoming more of a reality.

### **The Lawsuit and the Beginning of the End for the Riverfront Stadium Plan**

As the construction and financing plans for the riverfront stadium came closer to being finalized, opponents to the project realized they needed to take action quickly if they had any chance of preventing it. On April 18, 1972, Belleville Mayor Royce Smith filed a lawsuit in Wayne County Circuit Court on behalf of a group of concerned Wayne County citizens to prevent the sale of public bonds for the riverfront stadium. In the lawsuit, Smith argued that Wayne County’s pledge to back the bonds with the full faith and credit of the county essentially provided public money to support the Detroit Tigers, a private business, which violated the Michigan Constitution of 1963. Smith claimed, “We firmly believe that there’s no way that it...can possibly be a profitable proposition.”<sup>57</sup> Rather than using public funds to benefit John Fetzer and the Detroit Tigers club, the lawsuit claimed that “the county of Wayne is in need of all its funds for

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “Suit Protests Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 19 April 1972.

public purposes, not the least of which include construction of new jail facilities, which has already been ordered by the Wayne County Circuit Court, educational and health facilities, and manpower and facilities to prevent crime within the County of Wayne.”<sup>58</sup>

One of the major points of disagreement between the plaintiffs and the WCSA was whether the stadium fulfilled a public need. Charles Moon, attorney for the Wayne County Stadium Authority, declared that the stadium was “a typical (building) authority project” which would serve “a legitimate public purpose” as defined by the Michigan State Legislature.<sup>59</sup> Buildings like the proposed stadium had been constructed under several previous occasions with the use of public funds or bonds. Those projects were allowed under the state constitution because they were serving a public need. Ronald Prebenda, attorney for the plaintiffs, claimed that the difference between those projects and the downtown stadium was that “the stadium has not been shown to be a needed public service and argued the county cannot constitutionally place its credit behind the stadium bonds.”<sup>60</sup>

Thomas Adams and the WCSA claimed for years that the revenues brought in by stadium events and the overall economic benefit it would have on the riverfront area far exceeded the costs of planning, constructing, and operating the stadium. According to WCSA members, the stadium project would bring in millions of dollars in ticket revenues

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<sup>58</sup> Complaint: Marc Alan, William Roskelly and Royce Smith, taxpayers on behalf of a class, consisting of taxpayers in Wayne County, and City of Belleville, a municipal corporation v. County of Wayne, a body politic and a subdivision of the State of Michigan, and Wayne County Stadium Authority, a municipal corporation, DEDC Collection, Box 11 Folder 2.

<sup>59</sup> “State High Court Hears Two Sides on Detroit Stadium,” *Oakland Press*, 9 June 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 11 Folder 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

from Tigers games, various sporting events, and conventions.<sup>61</sup> Further, revenues from parking, concessions, advertising, and rent payments from the Tigers would help the WCSA to retire the revenue bonds without using any funds from the city or county. The stadium would also encourage business development along the riverfront, including office buildings, restaurants, bars, apartment complexes, and shopping centers. City and county governments would benefit from increased tax revenues in the riverfront district, further supporting the WCSA's assertion that the domed stadium would have a positive economic impact on the entire region.

The plaintiffs, however, challenged the WCSA's financial projections. They thought the project would inevitably need municipal funds despite the WCSA's declarations to the contrary. Prebenda described the WCSA's financial projections as "pie in the sky" and provocatively stated that the project would lead to "the rape of the taxpayers of Wayne County."<sup>62</sup> The plaintiffs disagreed with many of the attendance projections the WCSA listed in its financial forecast. In an appearance on the Lou Gordon Program on WKBD-TV in late April, Prebenda accused the WCSA of misleading the public in order to push the bond sale through and start construction before the truth of the issue could surface. "I don't think they're showing good faith to the people of this county. No, absolutely, categorically not," Prebenda responded when asked whether Thomas Adams and the WCSA were operating in good faith when they pushed forward to sell the stadium bonds with a potential lawsuit pending, "This is

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<sup>61</sup> WCSA, Financial Projections for Proposed Stadium, May 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 5 Folder 5.

<sup>62</sup> "State High Court Hears Two Sides on Detroit Stadium," *Oakland Press*, 9 June 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 11 Folder 1.

litigation that goes to the, to the very heart of the matter, the constitutionality of these acts. And they're proceeding, in the bond market, to sell these bonds."<sup>63</sup>

The Detroit riverfront stadium was just one of many proposed or constructed public sports facilities in the United States from 1960 to the early 1970s. Various methods were employed by team owners and public officials to finance their new facilities. In Irving, Texas, the Dallas Cowboys football team offered citizens a chance to purchase stadium bonds for \$250 each. The bonds carried little interest, but they were able to market them in a way that made fans feel as though they were directly involved in the stadium construction process. They also made bond purchases a prerequisite to the purchase of season tickets or luxury suites for the upcoming NFL season.<sup>64</sup> Bert Rose, general manager of the Texas Stadium Corp., argued that the key benefit of this plan was that only those individuals who intended on using the stadium would pay for its construction. Rose quipped, "The little old lady who doesn't know if a football is pumped or stuffed won't have to pay anything."<sup>65</sup> This scenario offered a stark contrast to the stadium plan offered by the WCSA, which used the general funds of the county as an emergency backup should construction costs run over budget. In comparison to the stadium plans for several other American cities during this period, Detroit was in many ways an outlier. Thomas Adams, Jerome Cavanagh, Roman Gribbs, and most of the decision makers in the Motor City's push for a municipal stadium emphasized the importance of a downtown stadium to give people a reason to come back to Detroit. But

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<sup>63</sup> Transcript, "Lou Gordon Program," WKBD-TV, 30 April 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 11 Folder 1.

<sup>64</sup> "Cowboys in New Plush Home Today," *New York Times*, 24 October 1971; "Dallas Stadium is Built Texas Style," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 Jan 1972.

<sup>65</sup> "Dallas Stadium is Built Texas Style," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 Jan 1972.

in many other metropolitan areas, professional franchises and civic leaders joined together to build professional sports facilities in suburban locales. The NFL's New England Patriots opened their new home in Foxboro, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1971; the Dallas Cowboys played in Texas Stadium in Irving; the Minnesota Vikings were negotiating with municipal leaders in Bloomington, Minnesota, to build a football stadium next door to the Minnesota Twins baseball park; and William Clay Ford had recently agreed to move his team to Pontiac after forty years in Detroit.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps the more significant difference between Detroit's stadium plan and the others that were completed or in development around the country was the total cost of the project. Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium (1971) cost \$53 million; Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium (1970) was built for \$60 million; Texas Stadium's (1971) total costs were around \$27 million; and Foxboro's Schaffer Stadium (1971) was built for a remarkably low cost of around \$6 million.<sup>67</sup> Even in comparison to the Pontiac stadium plan's price tag of roughly \$40 million, the WCSA's plan for a \$126 million multi-purpose stadium seemed obscenely extravagant for a city that lost a large share of its tax base to the suburbs over the past two decades. The fact that other communities built municipal sports complexes for their professional teams for a fraction of the cost of the riverfront stadium surely made some Detroiters wonder why the WCSA couldn't come up with a more sensible and cost-conscious proposal.

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<sup>66</sup> William N. Wallace, "U.S. Trend in Stadiums is Away from the Cities," *New York Times*, 27 August 1971.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*; "Dallas Stadium is Built Texas Style," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 Jan 1972.



As professional teams around the country built or played in more cost-effective stadiums, Detroit and the WCSA awaited word on Judge Blair Moody, Jr.'s decision in Wayne County Circuit Court on the constitutionality of the riverfront stadium plan. On June 1, Moody issued a permanent injunction against the plan to sell \$126 million in stadium bonds to finance construction. Moody declared that the WCSA's proposal violated the Michigan Constitution by using public funds for the benefit of a private business.<sup>68</sup> The judge blasted the stadium deal, stating that the Tigers baseball club "receives the use and profit-making potential of a proposed magnificent edifice for a relative pittance. The transaction is so one-sided as to convert an originally intended public use of the stadium into a non-public use primarily for private benefit."<sup>69</sup> The reaction of stadium supporters was predictably frustrated but still hopeful that the ruling could be overturned on appeal. Robert FitzPatrick, chairman of the Wayne County Board of Commissioners and a long-time proponent of the riverfront plan, lamented, "I think it's unfortunate in the effect on the Detroit stadium. . . . But I don't really have any reactions until I see the final opinions of the Supreme Court."<sup>70</sup>

The *Free Press* editorial staff's response was less measured than Fitzpatrick's. In a June 6 editorial, the *Free Press* stated, "What [Moody's] decision amounts to is penalizing the authority for having the foresight to nail down at least one prospective customer for the stadium's facilities. With a major tenant assured, the bonds had far greater appeal to purchasers than bonds to build a structure with no guaranteed

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<sup>68</sup> "State High Court Hears Two Sides on Detroit Stadium," *Oakland Press*, 9 June 1972; "Judge Blocks Sale of Bonds to Finance Detroit Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 June 1972.

<sup>69</sup> "Judge Blocks Sale of Bonds to Finance Detroit Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 June 1972.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

prospects.”<sup>71</sup> The editorial also noted that “a number of stadiums have been built around the country under constitutional restrictions similar to Michigan’s,” and that “most of them have a baseball or football team as a major occupant.”<sup>72</sup> However, it failed to acknowledge that most of these stadiums were built for a fraction of the cost of the proposed riverfront facility. What the *Free Press* viewed as “foresight” on the part of the WCSA, Judge Moody saw as a public subsidy for John Fetzer, the millionaire owner of the Tigers. Had the stadium lease been less one-sided in favor of the Tigers, Moody may have ruled differently. But as the plan stood in June 1972, the public assumed all of the risk if the project went over budget while Fetzer was protected from additional costs.

The Michigan Supreme Court’s ruling came down very quickly, less than three weeks after Moody’s decision in the Wayne County Circuit Court. Despite the efforts of the WCSA to present the project as an economic benefit to the city and region, the high court upheld Judge Moody’s decision to block the sale of stadium bonds for the riverfront project.<sup>73</sup> The court did not immediately explain its reasoning for supporting Moody’s decision, but Tigers owner John Fetzer understood what the decision meant for the future of the riverfront stadium. Fetzer refused to alter the terms under which the Tigers would move into a new stadium, stating in rather sharp terms, “There’s not going to be any renegotiations of our lease. We have been very happy operating in Tiger Stadium. We

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<sup>71</sup> “No Case Against the Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 6 June 1972.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Michigan Supreme Court, Alan, Roskelly, Smith v. Wayne County and WCSA, June 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 11 Folder 6; “High Court Blocks Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 17 June 1972.

can use that stadium for years more.”<sup>74</sup> With Fetzer backing out of the project and William Clay Ford planning to move his team to Pontiac, the WCSA had no major tenants slated to move into the new stadium. Their existing plan was rejected by the Michigan Supreme Court; any alterations to that plan would leave them with no professional team willing to move into the riverfront facility. As of late June 1972, the plan to construct a domed, riverfront stadium was essentially dead.

More than two months after its initial ruling, the Michigan Supreme Court finally explained its decision to block the sale of riverfront stadium bonds. Justice G. Mennen Williams issued the court’s majority opinion, which accused the WCSA of misleading the public as it tried to finalize plans to finance and construct the stadium. According to the court, WCSA and Wayne County officials assured potential bondholders that the bonds would be repaid using property tax revenues from the general county fund if necessary, while omitting that information in their public announcements to rally support for the stadium plan. Williams chided stadium organizers for their duplicity throughout the bond sale process: “In each notice to the taxpayers the eye-opening and wallet-jolting message of the tax paragraph was curiously absent. At the same time the message of this tax paragraph was conspicuously present and brought home over and over in notices to bondholders....The notice is misleading....Misleading process is not due process.”<sup>75</sup> Williams accused Thomas Adams, WCSA officials, the Wayne County Board of Commissioners, and other leaders of the stadium plan of pushing the law “not to, but

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<sup>74</sup> “High Court Blocks Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 17 June 1972.

<sup>75</sup> “Stadium Backers Deceived Public, High Court Charges,” *Detroit Free Press*, 31 August 1972.

beyond the breaking point.”<sup>76</sup> Opponents of the stadium plan had long argued that the stadium would not result in the myriad benefits that Adams and the WCSA had promised, but the state’s highest court took their criticism a step further. Stadium officials intentionally deceived the public, rather than simply having been naïve in their assessment of the project’s potential benefits.

The main figures in the push for the new stadium denied any intentional dishonesty and still hoped they could get the riverfront development plan back on track. Thomas Adams labeled the Supreme Court’s accusation of deception as “a damned insult and very irritating.”<sup>77</sup> Detroit mayor Roman Gribbs was also surprised at the court’s assessment, exclaiming, “My Lord, there were headlines time and again. Everyone was aware of the potential tax liability.”<sup>78</sup> John Fetzer struggled to understand Judge Moody’s initial decision and the Supreme Court’s affirmation. In a letter to Dwight Havens of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, Fetzer lamented, “For the life of me I can’t understand how Judge Moody and the Supreme Court could be so far out of the mainstream, especially in these days when communications are so readily available.”<sup>79</sup> Despite their condemnation of the court’s accusatory opinion, Adams, Gribbs, Fetzer, and the rest of the main figures in the riverfront plan failed to produce any evidence to contradict the accusations.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> “Public May Get to Vote on Stadiums,” *Detroit Free Press*, 1 September 1972.

<sup>78</sup> “Gribbs Vows Fight to Keep Stadium Alive,” *Detroit Free Press*, 2 September 1972.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from John Fetzer to Dwight Havens, President, Chamber of Commerce, 7 July 1972, DEDC Collection, Box 4 Folder 15.

Instead, many of the main stadium boosters shifted the focus away from their deception of the public and toward a potential public referendum to finally decide the fate of the stadium plan. Adams stated that he was willing to put the stadium plan, including the bond issue, to a public vote “if that’s the way the public wants it.”<sup>80</sup> Wayne County Commission Chairman Robert FitzPatrick also felt confident in the results of a public vote on the issue, or perhaps he realized this was the only way to keep the stadium plan alive. FitzPatrick acknowledged, “It appears they are going to have to go to a referendum....I don’t think any public official objects to that.”<sup>81</sup> A *Free Press* editorial expressed similar sentiments: “A public referendum is the only way to give the program a chance of getting going again....If the project can be shown to be a good investment for Detroit, and we believe it can, it will be able to stand on its own before the voters. If it cannot, then it should be abandoned.”<sup>82</sup> After receiving an embarrassing public rebuke from the state’s highest court, stadium officials used the idea of a public vote to demonstrate their confidence in the plan, even though no one involved in the WCSA, Detroit City Council, or Wayne County Board of Commissioners supported the idea of a referendum until it was necessary for the survival of the stadium plan.

Stadium officials’ late-stage display of confidence in the public’s support of the riverfront stadium ignored the fact that the entire plan was falling apart. The Halsey-Stuart syndicate that initially agreed to purchase the bonds backed out of the deal in late

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> “A Ballot Test for the Stadium,” *Detroit Free Press*, 2 September 1972.

June after Judge Moody's decision in the circuit court.<sup>83</sup> Also, despite their public statements supporting the idea of a referendum on the stadium issue, Adams, FitzPatrick, and WCSA officials never pushed for a vote. They realized that the majority of citizens would probably not support the use of public funds on the project, especially after all of the negative publicity in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling. Belleville Mayor Royce Smith, one of the leading plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the WCSA, argued that the lack of interest among private investors in the project was a clear sign that the stadium was not the sound investment that Adams and others made it out to be. In particular, Smith wondered why Henry Ford II was not willing to offer financial support to the project. Ford was one of the leading figures on the Detroit Renaissance committee, a group of business and civic leaders interested in redeveloping downtown and stimulating industrial and commercial development throughout the city following the 1967 riot. Smith learned that Ford had recently backed the refinancing of the Houston Astrodome but was unwilling to do the same in Detroit. Smith wondered, "If our stadium was such a sure thing, why wouldn't they (Ford) finance it?"<sup>84</sup>

### **The Pontiac Stadium Plan Continues Forward**

The riverfront stadium project was at a standstill following the Circuit Court and Supreme Court rulings, but Pontiac's stadium plan was still moving along. In late March 1972, the Pontiac Stadium Building Authority released the final architectural plans for a covered, open-end football stadium, estimated to cost \$41 million and slated to open in

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<sup>83</sup> "Investors Kill Bid on Bonds, Stadium Dead," *Detroit Free Press*, 29 June 1972.

<sup>84</sup> "Stadium Foe Hails Victory," *Detroit Free Press*, 1 September 1972.

1975.<sup>85</sup> A few different reasons explain why the plans for the Pontiac stadium continued forward while the riverfront facility project languished. First, original estimates on the total cost of the Pontiac project were less than one-third the total cost estimate of the WCSA's \$126 million proposal for the riverfront stadium. The total principal and interest on the riverfront bonds was estimated at \$371 million, a significant investment for a city that lost much of its tax base to the surrounding suburbs over the past several decades.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps just as important is the fact that Pontiac and Oakland County residents voted on December 11, 1972, to approve the sale of revenue and general obligation bonds to finance the proposed stadium.<sup>87</sup> The referendum narrowly passed, but it gave the Pontiac Stadium Building Authority the consent to place the city's financial faith and credit behind the stadium project. WCSA officials, on the other hand, never mentioned the idea of a referendum until it seemed the only way to move forward with financing and construction.

In June 1973, the Michigan Legislature passed a bill authorizing the raising of interest rates for revenue bonds for the Pontiac stadium. Governor William Milliken signed it just a few days later.<sup>88</sup> This was another important hurdle that the Pontiac plan cleared in order to finalize plans for the stadium project. A group of concerned citizens filed a lawsuit to try to halt the sale of the bonds and construction of the stadium, but unlike in Detroit's case, the lawsuit was dismissed by the Michigan Supreme Court. The

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<sup>85</sup> "Final Plans, Sketch Unveiled for Pontiac Football Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 30 March 1972.

<sup>86</sup> "Public May Get to Vote on Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 1 September 1972.

<sup>87</sup> "Pontiac Stadium Hopes Get Shot in the Arm," *Hillsdale Daily News*, 12 December 1972.

<sup>88</sup> "Pontiac Stadium Wins Bond Hike," *Detroit Free Press*, 26 June 1973.

court ruled that the suit did not go through the proper circuit and appellate courts, and the bond issuance was already approved by Pontiac voters.<sup>89</sup> For all the difficulties the WCSA and Detroit leaders had unifying voters in support of the project and finalizing plans in order to begin construction, Pontiac's stadium officials benefited from a more supportive electorate and a more cost-effective stadium plan.

After Pontiac citizens voted in favor of the bond issue in December 1972, the city's stadium plan proceeded rather quickly. Workers began construction of the Pontiac stadium in September, just a few months after the Michigan Supreme Court dismissed the lawsuit. Harold Cousins, chairman of the Pontiac Stadium Building Authority, declared "the start of a new era" for the city of Pontiac.<sup>90</sup> Detroit was the central cultural and entertainment destination in the region since the nineteenth century, including being the host of four major professional sports teams. That Pontiac was now bringing one of those franchises to the suburbs symbolized the economic, political, and demographic shifts that had taken place in southeastern Michigan and in metropolitan areas across the country during the mid-twentieth century.

In August 1975, the Detroit Lions began play in the brand-new Pontiac Metropolitan Stadium (later known as the Pontiac Silverdome), after four decades in Detroit. The new facility was the largest domed stadium in the world upon opening, with a capacity of more than 80,000. Although the Lions were perennial also-rans in their division for more than a decade, more than fifty thousand Detroit area residents bought their season tickets before a single game was played. The new facility promised to be an

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<sup>89</sup> "Stadium Bond Suit Ousted," *Escanaba Daily Press*, 1 August 1973.

<sup>90</sup> "Ground Is Broken for Pontiac Stadium," *Detroit Free Press*, 20 September 1973.



economic boon for the city of Pontiac and the Detroit metropolitan area, pumping an estimated \$33 million into the local economy and creating an estimated 2,000 jobs on football game days.<sup>91</sup> The total cost of the stadium, \$55 million, exceeded the original \$41 million estimate, a very common occurrence in stadium construction and one of the main reasons Detroiters refused to offer their support to the riverfront stadium project. Nevertheless, Pontiac residents hoped the investment would pay off over the next several decades.

### **Detroit's Riverfront Stadium Plan Falls Apart**

Meanwhile, in Detroit, WCSA officials and stadium supporters held out faint hope that the riverfront stadium plans could be revived. However, no developments in Detroit supported those dreams. It became clearer as time passed that the riverfront project was dead, at least in its original form. In January 1974, Detroit investor Max Fisher expressed interest in purchasing the riverfront site for the development of a massive apartment complex. Thomas Adams hoped to rally support for the stadium and, perhaps, a referendum on the sale of stadium bonds to try to get the project moving again.<sup>92</sup> In truth, however, the stadium plan had no momentum and most political and business leaders had shifted their attention to other issues and other projects that could strengthen Detroit's economy.

By the time construction was underway in Pontiac from 1973 to 1975, the stadium plan in Detroit was essentially dead. William Clay Ford and the Lions were committed to leaving the city, the state's Supreme Court ruled against the questionable tactics of the

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<sup>91</sup> "Pontiac, Mich. Stadium 'a symbol,'" *Chicago Daily Herald*, 18 June 1975.

<sup>92</sup> "Stadium Gets a Rival for Site on Riverfront," *Detroit Free Press*, 16 January 1974.

WCSA, and Tigers owner John Fetzer declared that he was happy to keep his team in Tiger Stadium. Fetzer, in fact, had no interest in renegotiating the terms of the original lease for the riverfront stadium. What did this mean for the city of Detroit? The failure of the riverfront stadium plan was a blessing in disguise in an economic sense. As many economists later proved, construction of public sports facilities was rarely, if ever, a sound financial investment. The *Detroit Free Press*, a staunch supporter of the riverfront stadium, acknowledged that the WCSA's estimates were based upon faulty logic: "Detroit's plans for a domed riverfront stadium, once touted as the symbol of the city's Renaissance, are at this moment a symbol of the city's frustration. Driven by their vision of the downtown that could be, the backers of the stadium project...let themselves lose sight of some of their other obligations. And what they built, as a result, was not a stadium at all, but a house of cards."<sup>93</sup> The WCSA's failure to build the riverfront facility probably saved Detroit millions of dollars in the long term.

From a cultural and symbolic standpoint, however, the entire riverfront stadium episode was an example of Detroit's futility and inability to bring political leaders, business elites, and the citizenry together for the common good of the city. Most scholars of stadium economics concur that publicly funded sport stadiums are a poor investment from an economic standpoint.<sup>94</sup> They do not generate enough additional revenue for a

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<sup>93</sup> "Stadium Failure a Blow to the City's Confidence," *Detroit Free Press*, 1 September 1972.

<sup>94</sup> See George Lipsitz, "Sports Stadia and Urban Development: A Tale of Three Cities," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (1984), 1-18; Charles A. Euchner, *Playing the Field: Why Sports Teams Move and Cities Fight to Keep Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Kenneth L. Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game: Cities in Pursuit of Sports Franchises, Events, Stadiums, and Arenas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Mark S. Rosentraub, "Stadiums and Urban Space," in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes: The Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Stadiums*, ed. Roger G. Noll and Andrew Zimbalist (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997); Dennis Zimmerman, "Subsidizing

city or metropolitan area to justify construction on the basis of economics alone. However, these scholars have not adequately considered the cultural benefits that sport stadiums can provide to cities. These benefits are much harder, if not impossible, to measure. But they are worth considering and deserve the same sort of analysis as the economics of stadium construction. In the case of Detroit's proposed riverfront stadium, boosters of the project emphasized that the project could be a major step in revitalizing the city. They may have been referring to the economic stimulus it could generate for the city, which most economists have argued is doubtful, but they also may have been suggesting that a modern sport stadium in the heart of downtown Detroit could stimulate pride among Detroiters and give them something to be proud of in an era of racial turmoil and rising unemployment.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the fractured political and socioeconomic landscape of the city made it nearly impossible for civic leaders to reach consensus. The 1967 riot brought attention to the racial and economic divisions that had plagued the city since the 1940s. Pledging tens of millions of dollars to a sports facility led to significant backlash from Detroiters who understood the dire economic circumstances the city faced throughout the period. A *Free Press* editorial following the Supreme Court's ruling against the WCSA declared that "the stadium could even yet be a symbol of a new Detroit a-building. But that will be only if *there is* a new Detroit a-building, and it is

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Stadiums," in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes*; Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist, "Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Facilities," in *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes*, 56-58; Michael Danielson, *Home Team: Professional Sports and the American Metropolis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 123-33.

obvious we have a way to go on that now.”<sup>95</sup> The stadium became a symbol of a Detroit that could have been. The city’s inability and unwillingness to address its deep racial and economic divisions over several decades prevented projects like the riverfront stadium from ever being realized.

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<sup>95</sup> “Stadium Failure a Blow to the City’s Confidence,” *Detroit Free Press*, 1 September 1972.

## CONCLUSION

After decades of planning and preparation, Detroit's hopes for a world-class, downtown domed stadium were dashed. Despite the continued promises of city leaders regarding the economic benefits of a stadium for the entire city and the persistent boosterism from the mainstream press, Detroiters disagreed on the importance of a riverfront stadium, signifying the existence of strong divisions regarding the allocation of municipal resources. The lawsuit that ultimately ended the riverfront stadium project symbolized the voice of Detroiters and Wayne County residents who were not swayed by the positive spin that the local press and the WCSA had put on the downtown stadium plan. Despite this deep schism among local citizens, Detroit's new mayor Coleman Young announced in early 1974 that he intended to resurrect the stadium project. On April 6, 1974, less than two years after the Michigan Supreme Court ruled against the WCSA and halted the riverfront stadium plan, Young announced the appointment of a new committee to select a downtown site for a new stadium.<sup>1</sup>

Coleman Young was Detroit's first African-American mayor and represented a shift in political power within Detroit. Young had been a major force in Detroit politics and community activism since the 1950s. He served as director of the Wayne County branch of the Council of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the 1940s, was executive secretary for the National Negro Labor Council in the early 1950s, and was elected to the

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<sup>1</sup> "A Brief, Chronological History of the Detroit Riverfront Stadium," Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, June 1974, Box 12, Folder 12, DEDC.

Michigan State Senate in 1964.<sup>2</sup> Young successfully united the city's black middle class, unions, and white liberals to strengthen and grow the liberal coalition of Detroit.<sup>3</sup>

Young argued that a vibrant downtown would contribute to the health and stability of other neighborhoods throughout the city. Historian Wilber Rich claims that Young's support for downtown redevelopment stemmed from his belief that downtown construction "would once again attract the attention of potential investors." Rich also argues that Young wanted the local professional sports teams downtown in order to keep suburban residents interested in the area.<sup>4</sup> Young secured five million dollars in federal funds for the project under a public works bill, and on October 20, 1976, he announced plans to build a sports arena just west of Cobo Hall at a cost of \$15 to \$20 million.<sup>5</sup>

As with many other stadium construction projects, the actual costs ended up being considerably higher than originally estimated. In June 1978, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that the arena would cost around \$25 million, and the final cost of the project came to \$27 million.<sup>6</sup> Named Joe Louis Arena after the local boxing hero, the facility's seating capacity of around 20,000 was much smaller than the original domed stadium's planned capacity, and construction costs amounted to less than one quarter of the original plan. The opening of Joe Louis Arena on December 12, 1979, was a day of celebration

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Halpern, "I'm Fighting for Freedom': Coleman Young, HUAC, and the Detroit African American Community," *Journal of American Ethnic History* (1997), 24-5, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 195-8.

<sup>4</sup> Wilbur Rich, *Coleman Young and Detroit Politics: From Social Activist to Power Broker* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 201-2.

<sup>5</sup> Rich, *Coleman Young and Detroit Politics*, 171.

<sup>6</sup> "New City Arena Will Be Named for Joe Louis," *Detroit Free Press*, 20 June 1978; James P. Quirk and Rodney Fort, *Pay Dirt: The Business of Professional Team Sports* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 160.

for many supporters of the original riverfront stadium project, despite the smaller scale of the facility. Coleman Young proclaimed, “For more than a decade, the people of Detroit have dreamed of a sports arena on the riverfront. The Joe Louis Arena is a living monument to the people of our City and to the great champion for whom it is named.... Together, we all can share the pride in this great new contribution to the renaissance of Detroit.”<sup>7</sup>

The entire municipal stadium story in Detroit, from its inception with the creation of the Detroit Olympic Committee in 1936 to the opening of Joe Louis Arena in 1979, is in many ways a metaphor for the rise and fall of Detroit throughout the twentieth century. During the 1930s and 1940s, Detroit was the center of the American automobile industry, and the city’s population was growing at a rapid pace. Detroit had become an internationally renowned city for its economic strength and as the symbol of American industry. By the 1950s, Detroit still appeared to be a city on the rise, with nearly two million residents and an auto industry seemed as strong as ever. But as historian Thomas Sugrue has shown, Detroit’s economy was suffering as automation within the auto industry eliminated thousands of factory jobs, and federal housing policies that encouraged suburban homeownership and industrial decentralization led to a mass exodus of the city’s tax base.<sup>8</sup> During that same period, Fred Matthaei and the Detroit Olympic Committee came agonizingly close to bringing the Olympics to Detroit and building a municipal stadium. The shifts in federal funds for military-industrial

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<sup>7</sup> Coleman Young’s statement on the opening of Joe Louis Arena, 12 Dec 1979, Box 137 Folder 19, Coleman Young Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, MI.

<sup>8</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 130-41.

production to suburban and rural areas, however, were contributing factors in the city's failure to secure the Olympics. The DOC, Detroit civil leaders, and members of Michigan's state legislature disagreed over whether Detroit should the city would see a positive return on its investment.<sup>9</sup> If the city of Detroit had been on sounder financial ground during the 1950s and early 1960s, the Common Council and other civic leaders may have been more willing to take the financial risk.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the racial and economic problems that plagued Detroit were on full display. The July 1967 riot was one of the most destructive urban riot in American history, and marginalized groups of Detroiters expressed their concerns and disillusionment in sometimes destructive ways. The progress of the riverfront stadium was temporarily halted in the aftermath of the riot, and the way in which Detroiters and outsiders viewed the Motor City undoubtedly affected some of the decisions of the WCSA as the stadium plan moved forward. Also, by the early 1970s, an era of social protest had swept through the nation. The civil rights, gay rights, and anti-war movements, along with second-wave feminism swept throughout the country during the 1960s. Americans seemed more willing and eager to confront inequality and unfair public policy. The plaintiffs in the stadium lawsuit of 1972 were not necessarily directly involved in these broad social movements, but their lawsuit came about in an era in which citizens questioned authority and exercised their legal rights to dissent. The eventual construction of Joe Louis Arena in 1979 represented a small victory for stadium boosters in Detroit, but it was a far cry from the original, \$126 million, multi-purpose,

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<sup>9</sup> Letter from Richard Cross to Thomas Lane, 16 Nov 1959, Box 12 Folder 2, Detroit Olympic Committee Collection.



domed stadium that the WCSA and many of Detroit's civic leaders envisioned. The Detroit of the late 1970s was trying to maintain its "big league" status, but it was reeling from the structural problems and racial discrimination that had plagued the city over the past several decades.

Urban and sport historians can build upon this study by focusing their analysis on a few different areas that have been largely ignored to this point. One such area is the history of stadium projects that were never completed. Finished stadiums understandably get the most attention from scholars since there is a concrete structure to examine. Architectural historians and urban scholars have examined the design of the facilities and the built environment surrounding them to explain the connection between sport stadiums and other subfields within urban history. Also, many scholarly studies are often more concerned with the effect of stadiums on local economies after they open for business. But there are other unfinished stadium projects over the past sixty years that are also deserving of historical analysis. These projects could tell us as much or more about urban redevelopment, the economic geography of metropolitan areas, the influence of race on public policy, and the social and cultural influence of professional spectator sports in urban America.

This study could also contribute to a synthesis of the history of professional sport stadium construction in the United States. Some scholars have provided thorough analyses of the economic impact of sport stadiums, evolving trends in stadium design, and the influence of media in stadium construction. However, there still is no definitive history of stadium construction in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the present that combines these various topics of analysis into a comprehensive narrative.

Among the questions that could be addressed in such a synthesis: What were the major political, economic, and cultural trends that contributed to the ebb and flow of public financing and construction of sport stadiums? Why do we seem to have reached a point where cities continue to build despite the public backlash? As has been noted throughout this study, scholars have shown that redevelopment projects centered around stadium construction rarely lead to any significant growth in revenue or subsequent investment. In fact, publicly-funded stadiums usually cost cities millions of dollars while granting subsidies and tax breaks to wealthy team owners. Despite the research demonstrating that public funding of sport stadiums is a poor economic investment, cities continue to create new laws and taxes to subsidize the construction of sport facilities for professional teams. A thorough synthesis that provides answers to many of these questions could lead to sounder public policy decisions in the future.

The history of the Detroit Olympic Committee, the Wayne County Stadium Authority, and the city's municipal stadium plans symbolize the unique aspects of Detroit in comparison to its counterparts in urban America. No other major city experienced such a significant rise and fall during the twentieth century. From a burgeoning industrial center in the early 1900s to the Arsenal of Democracy during World War II to "Murder City" during the 1980s, Detroit has had its share of fortune and misfortune. The distinct possibility of hosting the Summer Olympics and the potential for a municipal stadium that could have been the envy of other American cities gave way to a racially divided, economically depressed, post-industrial reality.

In recent years, Detroit has tried once again to use stadium construction as a centerpiece in its redevelopment plan. The Detroit Tigers moved into Comerica Park in

the city's Foxtown entertainment district for the start of the 2000 baseball season, after eighty-eight years in Tiger Stadium. When the new stadium project was in its planning stages, local political leaders claimed that a new ballpark would bring millions of additional dollars in revenue into the city. Detroit mayor Dennis Archer estimated that it would generate \$285 million for the city's economy, and he claimed that spectators would spend more than \$100 million more in the surrounding bars, restaurants, and shops.<sup>10</sup> The total cost of the park approximated \$300 million, and some Detroiters wondered whether the priorities of Archer and other city leaders were misplaced. Frank Rashid, founder of the Tiger Stadium Fan Club, a group of citizens who unsuccessfully sued the city to prevent the funding of Comerica Park, lamented, "It's absurd that we're spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a new ballpark when we can't keep our libraries open regular hours and our kids don't even have safe playgrounds."<sup>11</sup> But Archer stressed the boost that Comerica Park would provide to the city's spirit, claiming that the new ballpark "will help restore the excitement of urban living that has been missing far too long from downtown Detroit."<sup>12</sup>

Cities continue to provide billionaire team owners with public funds and subsidies despite no discernable evidence that professional sport stadiums contribute to economic development and revitalization. However, the appeal of "big league" status still entices citizens and politicians to go against their economic interests and support the public funding of professional sports facilities. As long as major professional sports maintain

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<sup>10</sup> "Court Removes an Obstacle to a New Stadium in Detroit," *New York Times*, 6 July 1996.

<sup>11</sup> "Detroit Sees Park as Star Player in Redevelopment: Finding Hope in the Example of Cleveland," *New York Times*, 11 April 2000.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

their lofty position in American culture, team owners will use it to their advantage, and local taxpayers will continue to foot the bill.

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