

A Matter of Appeasement: Baseball Owners and the City of Chicago on the Matters of New Stadiums and Arc Lighting

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The Chicago White Sox and Chicago Cubs both severely altered their playing conditions at their home fields of Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field, respectively, in the late 1980s. The Chicago White Sox convinced the City and State to destroy Comiskey Park (which was the oldest stadium used in the major leagues) in exchange for a new publicly-built stadium. The Chicago Cubs convinced the City to allow the team to construct lights at Wrigley Field, which had remained without lights through the wishes of previous owner Philip K. Wrigley and later through city ordinance banning evening events at the stadium. Only under the threat of removal of these franchises to either the Chicago suburbs or to other cities (such as St. Petersburg, Florida), did the city and state cater to all of their demands.

Throughout the entire period, the media blamed the destruction of Chicago's baseball heritage on team owners Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn of the White Sox and Don Grenesko (for the Tribune Company) of the Cubs. Consequently, much of the historical work done on the demise of Comiskey Park and lights in Wrigley Field have also placed the blame on the team owners. While one cannot remove these gentlemen from the problem of stadium conservation, one can see that they did not work alone.

This paper examines the role of the city as appeaser in negotiations over getting the new stadium constructed and lifting the legislative ban on evening events at Wrigley Field. By using the valuable Robert Mier papers at the Chicago Historical Society's Archives and Manuscripts Department, a new insight into the stadium issue was possible. Mier, who served as a high ranking officer in the city's Department of Economic Development for Mayors Washington and Sawyer, was a key figure in the negotiations with the baseball teams from 1985-1989.

Three main areas are examined in the paper that shed light on the actions of the city in allowing the baseball teams to dictate their future. First, the city's statement on the economic impact of a major league baseball team which freely exaggerates in favor of the baseball club. Second, the relative disregard for the effected neighborhoods (especially the primarily African-American South Armour

Square neighborhood that was partly destroyed in order to build the new stadium). And third, the issues of political selfpreservation and municipal ego that are often paramount in the construction of large public buildings (especially stadiums).

The conclusions can be summed up in a quote by a minor league baseball team owner who said: "There's no politician in the country so popular that he can run against professional baseball." By no means should we assume that what happened in Chicago is unique; but represents a far greater trend of relationships between municipalities and the very identifiable professional sports teams that call the cities their home.