

Analysis of the Tampa Bay Rays ‘Sister City’ Plan based on Urban Catalysts Theory

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Abstract: In MLB, small market teams have fewer fans and relatively less access to resources, and even less opportunity to gain exposure. Whether it's the fan base, the team's financial resources, the size of the market or the size of the benefits received, small market teams can't compete with big market teams. In this environment, the Tampa Bay Rays have managed to bounce back. Since 2008, the Rays have made the playoffs six times in 14 years, and two trips to the World Series. However, such a strong team has a sluggish ball market that does not match the booming sports atmosphere. Therefore, in order for the team to further expand its popularity, attract more fans, and thus gain more economic benefits and tap into the huge market potential, the Tampa Bay Rays propose a sister-city plan and has caused widespread controversy. This study attempts to discuss the future development direction of the team through the theory of urban catalyst, from the two aspects of team development and urban promotion, and put forward the best interests of the future development of the Tampa Bay Rays.

Keywords: Tampa Bay Rays, Montreal, Sister City Plan, Urban Catalysts

1. Introduction

Florida, a resort destination on the East Coast of the United States, is one of the most comprehensive and thriving sports states in the country, and all four major sports leagues in the country can see Florida teams in their respective finals: the Tampa Bay Rays in baseball, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in football, the Miami Heat in basketball and the Tampa Bay Lightning in hockey. Despite this, the Tampa Bay Rays, despite their success, have always struggled in a small-market business model because they rank at the bottom of the league in terms of attendance.

1.1. The Sluggish Ball Market that does not Match the Booming Sports Atmosphere

The two teams in the major leagues, the Miami Marlins and the Tampa Bay Rays, are both in Florida. The Rays have been among the powerhouses in the American League East for the last 14 years, while the Marlins have won the World Series twice in just under 30 years of existence, plus a number of Florida universities are baseball powerhouses. Many people will wonder why baseball soil is so fertile while attendance always struggles to meet expectations. The answer is obviously not clear in a sentence or two, but it is inevitably linked to the unique demographic makeup of this state. Because

of its southeastern location, Florida is home to a large number of Latin American immigrants from North and Central America and the Caribbean who speaks Spanish. Miami, for example, has a large concentration of Cuban immigrants and a Latin American population in the city known as Little Havana. Latin American immigrants bring diversity, and when Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic makes an appearance at the Marlins' home field in the World Baseball Classic, attendance is even much higher than usual for major league games, but such a large fan base struggles to be fully absorbed by the local major league team during the regular season. In addition to Latin American immigrants, the other major group of Florida residents are seniors from the Northeast New York or New England areas. Most of them worked in the northeastern metropolis when they were young and retired to Florida, where state income taxes are better, prices are cheaper and the weather is warmer. Naturally, these older fans have their home team determined early on and don't immediately become Rays fans because they moved to a new city; the viewing experience influences the choice of these Buddhist fans. Although the Rays have had an excellent record in recent years and have been a playoff-caliber team, the Marlins are hoping to activate the market by signing star players, the effect on boosting attendance is extremely limited. In this context, both the Mariners and the Rays have made many attempts to attract fans.

1.2. Moving is not Easy

In 2019 Tampa Bay Rays owner Stuart Sternberg proposed a plan unprecedented in MLB: turn the Rays into a two-home team, with the first two-and-a-half months of the six-month-long regular season in Tampa Bay and the second three-and-a-half months moved to Montreal [1]. For an MLB team with roots in a specific city, the Tampa Bay Rays' attempt is a bold one. Obviously, it will not be easy to make such a plan come true. There are still a lot of difficult problems to be solved. The Rays, as a small market team, currently cannot support their operations in the major leagues with just the Tampa Bay ball market. Small market teams have fewer fans, fewer resources, and even fewer opportunities for exposure. Whether it's the fan base, the team's financial resources, the size of the market or the size of the benefits they receive, small market teams can't compete with big market teams. Now Tampa Bay Rays, among the league's 30 teams, are in the lower end of all economic indicators. Sternberg said he has no plans to sell the team. However, with the current situation, it's hard to predict whether the team will be able to continue to operate beyond 2027. Tampa Bay is not a good fit for major league baseball and that it cannot support 81 home games [2]. One of the main reasons is Tropicana Field, the home of the Rays. The site, known as the worst baseball home in the league, is inaccessible and far from the city's population core, especially during the rush hour, the late game commute, when the roads from downtown to the stadium are crowded. Not willing to waste precious time in traffic, many fans abandoned plans to go to the Rays' home game. The Rays have lost a lot of money due to the stadium: attendance is the second lowest in the league. However, Major League Baseball officials rejected the Sister City plan two and a half years when it was proposed, citing its complexity and other unknown reasons. That prompted new negotiations to find a new stadium in Tampa Bay to continue operations, save the Rays' attendance and safeguard the team's vital financial revenue.

2. Urban Catalysts Theory

"Catalyst" is a concept in chemistry, i.e. a catalyst. The theory of "Urban Catalysts" was first proposed by American scholars Wayne Atton and Donn Logan in 1989, who argued that the "urban catalyst" effect refers to urban chemical chain reactions. The "catalysts" that stimulate and sustain a chemical reaction in a city may be a hotel, a shopping district, a transportation center, or a sports stadium. An "urban catalyst" is a new element that can cause a change in a city and accelerate or change its

development, i.e., a "chain reaction" triggered by the intervention of a specific "catalyst" [3]. A positive "catalyst" is a new element that can lead to change and accelerate or change the pace of urban development. An urban design with a positive "catalyst" will bring a positive impact on the development of the city.

Robertson et al provide an analytical framework for assessing the catalytic effect of sporting events on urban regeneration. He proposed the Special Activity Generator (SAG) strategy for urban regeneration in the United States [4]. The core idea of this strategy is to hold large events in urban centers to promote the regeneration of the area by attracting tourists and suburban residents to the urban center. This influx of people can provide the traffic needed to support the development of restaurants and other retail establishments in the area. In addition, these large events often stimulate other public sector investments in the area in the form of new infrastructure or urban design improvements that help to enhance the vitality of the area. Robertson also suggests 3 main goals of the SAG strategy: (1) generate spillover benefits to the surrounding area; (2) stimulate new building development; and (3) revitalize declining areas [4]. In summary, the SAG strategy and the "urban catalyst" theory are logically consistent and can be regarded as different expressions of the same theory, which are collectively referred to as the "urban catalyst" theory here. Both of them provide theoretical guidance for the practice of sports events for urban renewal. The "urban catalyst" theory believes that sports events are a catalyst for urban regeneration, and through rational planning and design, sports events can achieve the goal of promoting urban regeneration.

3. Methodology

The Tampa Bay Rays Sister City plan was an innovative initiative that was rejected, but it still made sense. The plan was proposed with an indispensable connection to Tropicana Field. Based on the analysis of relevant typical cases, this study sorted out the main performance and promotion strategies of stadiums in the United States to promote urban renewal, and combined with the actual situation of Tampa Bay to further reveal the controversial points of the Sister City plan, in order to provide the theoretical and practical reference for the selection of new stadiums in the future and the promotion of urban renewal.

4. Results

The controversy of the Sister City plan comes from all aspects of the stakeholders, the stakeholders in their own interests to the maximum degree of satisfaction, put forward to the plan or support or oppose the proposition.

4.1. The Team and its Members

For the team owners, the Rays' current home field is Tropicana Field, which is known as the worst home field in baseball in the league. As a result of the stadium, the Rays have the second-lowest attendance in the league. The location of Pure Globo Field further exacerbates the difficulty of attracting fans to the stadium. With the mouth of Tampa Bay facing south, most of the population is on the east shore of the bay and the ballpark is on the west shore, both sides of which are primarily commuted by the Cross Bay Bridge, making it extremely congested during rush hour. With a tight MLB schedule, weekday games can be difficult to get to if traffic is difficult. 2019 season the Rays have the second-lowest home attendance in the league with only 1.18 million. The top-ranked Los Angeles Dodgers had 3.97 million attendance and 18 teams in the league reached 2 million [5]. Especially since the Rays returned to the playoffs after six years with 96 wins in the 2019 regular season, the ticket sales should have been good in other cities with such a great home team record. The

Oakland Athletics, also known for their small market, had 1.66 million viewers. So from a marketing perspective, the Rays need a new city. With a population of over 4 million, the Montreal metro area ranks 19th on the North American continent, about 1 million more than the Tampa Bay metro area, which ranks 24th. The area also has more spending power than Tampa Bay, making it an attractive potential market. By making Montreal their second home, the Tampa Bay Rays could help the Rays out, save the Rays' attendance and protect the team's vital coffers. The Tampa Bay Rays and Toronto Blue Jays are also in the American League East, and if the Tampa Bay Rays make Montreal their second home game, it would be a "Canadian showdown" between the two teams, which would be good for both teams to boost attendance.

For the players, however, the Sister City plan will also be an inconvenience and, perhaps, the team will have to pay for them and their families to travel to Montreal. Although the U.S. and Canada are relatively connected economically and logistically, they use different currencies, and the tax, judicial, and other systems in Florida and Quebec, Canada, are not far apart. There are even some difficulties with living habits and language communication.

4.2. Fans

For Tampa Bay fans, the sister Cities plan is certainly a blow. Several authors have written about the cultural, social and psychological importance of sports fandom in the United States. In this "sports republic", residents of a city develop a highly personal connection to the team they follow [6]. Professional sports are unique among popular forms of entertainment in that supporters develop deep emotional attachments to their teams. Some psychologists have even suggested that some fans react to a team move in a psychologically similar way to the reaction to the death of a loved one [7-8]. Over the years, the Rays have distinguished themselves from many small-market teams through their ingenious drafts and complex and volatile trades. 2020 saw the Tampa Bay Rays take the best regular season record in the American League with 40 wins and make it all the way through the playoffs, defeating the Toronto Blue Jays, New York Yankees, and Houston Astros to win the American League Championship trophy for the second time in team history and advance to the World Series, where the Rays truly became The Rays have truly become a unique light in the hearts of fans. The focus on sports far outweighs its importance to the city's economy. The important psychological role that professional sports play in urban American society. The Sister City plan was a bitter blow to many fans.

Instead, for fans in Montreal and the surrounding area, look forward to a return to professional baseball. In 2005, the Montreal-based exhibition team left for Washington, D.C., and Canada's second largest city was left with a "baseball drought" of nearly 15 years. Although the Toronto Blue Jays have scheduled some pre-season games in Montreal since 2014, it has not satisfied the appetite of Montreal fans. The Montreal Expos were once the first team in Major League Baseball to locate their home field overseas. It once held many fond memories for baseball fans. The story of Jackie Robinson, the famous African-American baseball star who played for the Montreal Mets, was also made into a short one-minute historical documentary. Whether it's the NBA or MLB, Canada is a near and dear overseas market that can be actively expanded. The Toronto Raptors, who won their first championship in the 2019 NBA Finals, and the crazy Toronto fans have shown more investors the huge potential value of the Canadian market.

4.3. Urban Development

4.3.1. Improve the City's Brand Image

Sporting events have been seen as an important means of building city brands to gain a competitive edge, increase investment and drive tourism. Indianapolis, for example, conducted a national survey in 1974 to find out what non-residents thought of the city. Surveys suggest that the city suffers from a "non-image" that many Americans barely know about [9]. During the revitalization of Indianapolis, local leaders chose to create the amateur sports capital of the world as the path to a new image for the city of Indianapolis. From 2002 to 2017, the city hosted 54 major amateur sports events and one NFL Super Bowl, in addition to the regular game of two NBA and NFL clubs. When the Colts moved from Baltimore to Indianapolis, Baltimore city officials said, "It dealt a heavy blow to Baltimore's Renaissance image." Therefore, the Tampa Bay Rays Sister City plan may be able to bring more and more quality sports events to Montreal and attract suburban population back to the city center through professional sports events, promoting the revitalization of the city center and improving the social perception of the city. At the same time, the effect on Tampa Bay's urban image is negative.

4.3.2. Return of Economic Activities to the Urban Center Area

For nearly 30 years, the high cost of living in Montreal, Canada, and especially the high price of housing, has led to an increasing number of Montreal residents moving to the suburbs. The latest demographic statistics released by the Institut de la statistique du Québec (Quebec Statistics Institute) show that this trend is accelerating, with 35,900 people moving out of Montreal in 2019-2020, making it the largest number of people moving since the start of the count in 2001, compared to the 27,000 people who came to settle in Montreal during the same period [10]. The epidemic's epidemic of teleworking has accelerated the loss of Montreal residents. From the government's point of view, the financial situation of the central city is struggling and declining as the migration to the suburbs intensifies. Increasingly, professional sporting events are being given a new historical mission to promote the renewal of urban centers. In economic terms, this is reflected in the use of sports events to stimulate the development of recreation, culture and tourism industries in neighboring areas, thus promoting the redevelopment of urban centers, stimulating the vitality of urban centers and consolidating their status [11].

4.3.3. The Value of Real Estate Around the Stadiums Increased

Companies operating professional sports clubs or stadiums in the United States are often involved in the real estate industry, and many studies have begun to look at the impact of stadiums on the value of surrounding real estate. According to Michael, many stadiums in the United States are occupied by professional sports clubs and host a large number of entertainment and leisure activities. Many stadiums attract more than 1 million visitors every year, and baseball stadiums can regularly attract more than 3 million people to watch games [12]. Sports attract large crowds, making stadiums valuable assets for real estate development in neighboring areas, and the large number of regular events increases the value of nearby real estate. Feng used hedonic functions with spatial autocorrelation to calculate the relationship between the distance between housing and sports venues and residential property values in US cities based on 1990 and 2000 census data within a 5-mile radiuses of each NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL venue in the US. Studies have shown that median residential property values in census tracts are inversely proportional to distance from stadiums [13]. Overall, the construction and operation of sports venues can promote the value increment of surrounding properties to a certain extent, and play a positive role in promoting urban renewal.

5. Conclusion

Studies show that sporting events are a good municipal investment. If the Sister City plan is successful and the Rays integrate into a vibrant and vibrant community, it is conceivable that fans from the local area will spend a certain amount of time and money in the neighborhood around the stadium before and/or after the game. A new radiance, combined with an urban renewal project, could meet the market demand for radiance and revitalize Montreal. However, with the Sister City plan falling apart and the Rays replanning for a new stadium, the location of Tropicana Stadium and the makeup of the local fan base made it extremely difficult for the Rays to operate in the major leagues. A team's home location needs to be carefully planned and a more sensible and fair approach would be to take due account of these policy and planning factors. Finding the right location in Tampa Bay could rekindle the passion of the local baseball fan base and usher in a new turning point for the struggling franchise, while further energizing the city, boosting its economy and creating a win-win situation for both the team and the city.

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