

Suburbs pitch to keep Tigers safe at home

See related story, Page 9A.

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

On Monday, the sites and sounds of major league baseball will return to the corner of Michigan and Trumbull, renewing a Detroit tradition that began nearly a century ago.

Sometime that afternoon, each of the more than 50,000 fans in attendance will no doubt scan vast, historic Tiger Stadium and wonder to themselves: How much longer?

Mike Duggan, a deputy county executive from Livonia, wonders. Duggan, point man for Wayne County Executive Edward McNamara on projects from a revenue-raising cigarette tax to county jail bonds, now faces perhaps his biggest challenge — keeping the Tigers in Detroit.

Success means convincing skeptical Tigers executives, and maybe county voters, the ballclub must stay.

Even Duggan isn't sure of his chances. There are competing stadium renovation plans from Birmingham and Royal Oak-based architects.

There are also dozens of alternative sites — including Plymouth Township — scattered throughout western Wayne and Washtenaw counties.

BUT WHEN it comes to preventing the Tigers from escaping to the suburbs, Duggan may have the only game in town.

Despite competition from the Tiger Stadium Fan Club, a well-organized citizens group, only the county has thus far been granted anything more than a cursory meeting with Tigers management.

Only the county has the ability to provide the financial assistance the Tigers may demand.

There's a lot at stake. "It's our belief that if the Tigers leave the city, you can pack it in," Duggan said. "It will cripple redevelopment issues for years to come."

It's not just the city that has a stake in the stadium's future, either. While not specifically endorsing McNamara's objectives, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments has formally urged the Tigers to stay right where they are.

"TIGER STADIUM is a development issue, like the other development issues on which we've taken a stand," said Ed Huestoles, SEMCOG deputy executive director. "We'd like to see them stay in Tiger Stadium or, at least, in the city."

"It gets back to infrastructure," said Huestoles, whose group represents communities in seven suburban counties, as well as Detroit. "If you build a new stadium, you're going to have to add roads, sewer and water, while we already have perfectly good facilities that wouldn't be used."

Oakland and western Wayne county mayors and township supervisors have already made it clear they don't want a stadium in their communities.

It was McNamara, a Livonia resident, who made Tiger Stadium a county issue.

"We went to the Tigers, they didn't come to us," Duggan said. "We felt the Tigers planned on leaving and we felt we had to do something."

McNamara's priorities are, in order of importance: keeping the Tigers in Detroit, keeping the Tigers in Tiger Stadium, if possible, and keeping the Tigers in Wayne County.

An alternative site hasn't been ruled out.

"There are several sites in the city where the Tigers could go," Duggan said.

Right now, however, efforts are concentrated on keeping the Tigers at Michigan and Trumbull.

The McNamara plan includes an ambitious effort to tie stadium renovation to redevelopment of Corktown, its historic surrounding neighborhood.

Of two competing architectural plans, McNamara is leaning toward the Birkerts-O'Neal plan. The plan combines the talents of Birmingham architect Gunar Birkerts — the man responsible for the Alfred Noble Library in Livonia and the University of Michigan Law Library in Ann Arbor — and Ann Arbor contractor Joe O'Neal.

The plan calls for an outer shell around the ballpark, including a new shell upon which would hang a reconstructed, post-free, upper deck.

"IN MY opinion, it goes a long way toward what the Tigers want," Duggan said.

Neighborhood redevelopment, possibly using the Reagan "enterprise zone" concept, would add shops, stores and restaurants around the ballpark site.

McNamara and Duggan envision it, Corktown would become a warm, lively place, as well as a source of jobs for a city that badly needs them.

"We don't want a fortress, we want something that would rival Greektown," Duggan said.

There's just one catch — the Tigers haven't signed on to any of this. Nor is there any guarantee they will.

"If you want to know how serious Monaghan is (about moving the team) he has refused to this day to even look at the plan," Duggan said.

Tigers management seems almost surprised renovation plans are still being considered.

"Two years ago, we looked at a number of options, including renovation, and it was our feeling that a new ballpark was needed," said Fred Haefe, Tigers senior vice president for planning and administration. "Our feelings haven't changed."

The Tigers are "more than willing to meet with McNamara and Mike Duggan," Haefe said, but are currently unaware of just what the executive has in mind.

"Quite frankly, they haven't put this in front of us," he said.

But the McNamara plan contains something that could make the Tigers sit up and take notice: public financing.

The county would issue stadium construction bonds, paid for through stadium revenues. There is precedent. Renovations completed in the 1980s, including removal of the stadium's old, green seats, were financed through a ticket surcharge.

Not counting Dodger Stadium, there hasn't been a major league baseball stadium built in the last 50 years or so without some degree of public assistance," Duggan said.

State aid won't be sought, Duggan said. It probably wouldn't be forthcoming from budget-cutting new governor John Engler anyway.

The county also won't seek state race track revenue, Duggan said, even though race track money was heavily used to build the Pontiac Silverdome. But that, too, might not be for lack of trying.

"We're also maxed out on race track revenue right now," said Steve Shepich, senior financial analyst with the state House Fiscal Agency. "Whatever we're taking in, we're spending. There wouldn't be any left over for a stadium."

Still, Shepich adds a footnote. "This would all change if they tie the stadium to legislation involving off track betting, like they did in Illinois," he said. "But I don't think I'm speaking out of turn when I say (Detroit Mayor) Coleman Young wants casino gambling for Detroit. It would be interesting to see how that would all play out."

At least three off-track-betting bills are already pending in the state Legislature.

An additional hotel/motel tax, permissible under legislation left over from Detroit's 1970s attempt to build a waterfront stadium, may prove a better possibility.

That, Duggan said, would merely

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require approval from the county commission.

"Public financing itself is controversial," Duggan said.

Toronto's new, state-of-the-art Skydome is already reporting deficits even though its chief tenant, baseball's Toronto Blue Jays, drew more fans last year than the Tigers, Montreal Expos and Atlanta Braves combined.

Toronto residents are bracing for new taxes. Some local fans warn the same could happen here.

"WE'RE NOT a taxpayers group, but we do have people who are opposed to using public financing," said William Dow of Birmingham, a UAW attorney and legal adviser to the Tiger Stadium Fan Club. (See related story for information on the Fan Club and its plans for stadium renovation.)

To those concerns, Duggan says this: Trust us.

"As an administration we have a track record," Duggan said. "We're just completing a new county jail and we're going to bring it in on budget. We'll soon be building a new morgue and we'll bring that in on budget."

Taxpayer contributions will be capped, he said, preventing Detroit from falling into the Toronto trap.

"When you announce to the world that you're going to build the Taj Mahal, you're going to have trouble," Duggan said, referring to the Skydome's on-site hotel, Hard Rock Cafe nightclub and other amenities.

"This is just going to be a baseball stadium." The question is whether that would be enough. Parking is important and the Tigers want more spaces. "It isn't

necessarily the key issue, but it's one of the keys," Haefe said. "We definitely believe it's something that needs to be addressed."

According to Duggan, nearly 3,000 parking spaces could be added. Of that, 2,000 would be on church property directly west of the stadium. Another 1,000 could be added to the north and east. If necessary, he said, the county wouldn't hesitate to use its condemnation powers.

The problem, is that the Tigers seek considerably more parking.

"We're looking at 12,000 to 15,000 cars," Haefe said.

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