

Portland: Don't let Triple A baseball go without at least a throw

by The Editorial Board
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The OregonianBetter days for baseball in Portland: Mayor-elect Bud Clark throwing the first pitch in 1984.

A packed house at Wednesday night's all-star game should remind Portland of Triple-A baseball's long and generally successful history here

Buried in baseball's scorekeeping rules is a word to describe a play in which a team allows an opposing runner to steal a base without trying to throw him out.

It's called "indifference." And if you're scoring at home in the game Portland's elected officials are playing with Triple-A baseball, it's time to pencil the word in your book. Most of the city's leaders seem content to let more than a century of baseball history in Portland steal away.

The official line is that there just isn't a place anywhere in the city for a new minor league stadium. Not PGE Park, which the city is eager to make over for Major League Soccer. Not Lents Park, deemed by many neighbors as space too precious for a stadium. Not the Rose Quarter, where preserving the hollow aquarium that is Memorial Coliseum has trumped saving a professional sport that has been part of Portland since 1903.

On Wednesday night, about 15,000 fans will crowd into PGE Park for the Triple-A all-star game. Jets will fly over the stadium, a circus will perform, some of the best young ballplayers in the country will be on the field. No, it won't be as sexy as a naked bike ride or as sustainable as a farmers market, but on a night when baseball draws this kind of audience, it seems fair to ask City Hall: Why the indifference?

We'll concede that Portland is no longer a great baseball town, if it ever was. For years now, it's taken all-star games, home-run contests, cheap beer, mullet nights or other promotions to bring out big crowds.

But Portland is a city with a long and rich baseball tradition. For most of the past century, through world wars, through good times and bad ones, a professional baseball team has trotted out onto a Portland field each summer.

You can look it up: In 1913, a Portland slugger named Bill "Raw Meat" Rodgers led the Pacific Coast League in hitting. Two years later, future Hall of Fame pitcher Stan Coveleski took the mound for the Beavers. Another future Hall of Fame player, Mickey Cochrane, arrived in 1924. Bob Feller, Ernie Banks, Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio and Willie Mays all took part in old-timers games or home-run derbies in Portland. Willie Stargell came to town with the Pirates in 1979 and did the impossible, launching a ball into the balcony of the Multnomah Athletic Club high, high, high above the right-field fence.

Yes, all this is musty baseball history. But remember, it was only seven years -- and two mayors -- ago that Portland eagerly invested millions of dollars to remodel PGE Park. The key tenant that the city wanted to preserve in Portland was none other than the Portland Beavers.

There no longer are any baseball fans at City Hall. But at least Commissioner Randy Leonard, who admits he doesn't much care for the sport, has fought gamely to keep Triple-A baseball in Portland. He pushed hard for the Lents site. He has refused to fold on the Memorial Coliseum site. The mayor and the rest of the council are, well, indifferent.

Let us say right here that we have consistently supported the council's decision to remodel PGE Park to fit the needs of a Major League Soccer franchise, which will be arriving in 2011. And we knew all along that such a choice would leave Triple-A baseball searching for a new home.

It's also true that Hillsboro, Vancouver and perhaps other suburban communities may step up to offer a new home for pro baseball in the metropolitan area. But still, it seems clear that a pretty little Triple-A stadium built along mass transit lines somewhere near downtown Portland would be much better than asking baseball fans to travel to Hillsboro or Vancouver for a game.

There also are risks in sitting back and inviting anyone and everyone to steal our Triple-A team. There are no guarantees that other cities, led by people who understand baseball's enduring entertainment value, won't take a run at swiping the franchise.

Our hope is that Portland leaders will notice that thousands of people came out to PGE Park on Monday for nothing more than a home-run derby. We hope they will see the enthusiastic crowd that gathers for the game Wednesday and make a renewed effort to find a place for a stadium in Portland.

But our advice to the fans is to enjoy this game, savor it and keep your scorecard. Because after more than 100 years of professional baseball in Portland, this may be the last big, exciting baseball event held in this city.