

Sometimes It's Just About Quality of Life

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The Senate Commerce and Tourism Committee wants to lavish a little money on Orlando's soccer hopes and dreams, and you know what? My conservative conscience is completely at peace with it.

By an 11-0 vote on Tuesday, the committee passed SB 358, a bill that would expand a \$2 million-a-year sales tax exemption that eight other professional sport franchises in Florida now enjoy.

It was disheartening to hear some folks after the meeting calling the bill "corporate welfare."

Senate sponsor David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs, explained that the bill wouldn't be a gratuitous handout to some billionaire franchise owner. It would require any interested party to ante up at least half the money for the stadium. Not only that, if the deal falls through, the city, not the state, would have to pick up the pieces and complete the payoff.

"The money that is generated from the operation of the facility actually pays for the tax that would be used to construct the stadium," Simmons said. "That is the beauty of this arrangement."

Sometimes thoughtful lawmakers, as the members of Simmons' committee were on Tuesday, have to look beyond the "corporate welfare" label to make the best decision for the people they represent and the impact their decision will have on the Florida they leave behind.

It's true, studies overwhelmingly find that job creation and tax revenue benefits of new stadiums take years, if not generations, to catch up to the outlay of public funds.

And things can go wrong -- especially if new-stadium deals are ineptly, perhaps even corruptly crafted and scantily monitored. Franchises change hands. The quality of ownership can fade like a mansion in a low-rent district. Certainly Miami-Dade, which emptied its pockets for the new Marlins Park only to get kicked in the teeth a year later, knows how that goes.

But what gets overlooked are the intangible, harder-to-measure positive effects sports facilities and major league teams have on a community's, a region's, a state's quality of life.

What an incalculable intangible benefit quality of life is.

Though the hold-it-in-your-hand-and-count-it advantage of partnering with a sports franchise may move at a glacial pace, the lasting benefit, the one that shapes and defines communities, is all about civic pride, community visibility and the enhancement of image.

It's a government's gift to its citizens.

I remember in the 1980s in Martin County, when the Houston Astros made its pitch to winter in Stuart. After a long and bitter fight, the deal was rejected -- because it was "a bad deal for the county," commissioners would have told you. The truth is, mostly it died for fear a Major League Baseball complex would add too much growth and traffic.

The park was planned on land along U.S. 1, where wall-to-wall shopping centers and eight lanes of traffic now flourish. Since 1990, Martin County folks who want to catch a spring baseball game -- and thousands do -- have to drive to Port St. Lucie to see the Mets, or Jupiter to see the Cardinals. Corporate welfare, my foot. A quality of life opportunity missed.

I wish the commission of the day had employed the wisdom and heart I saw Tuesday on the Senate Commerce and Tourism Committee.

Kathy Russell, a lobbyist for Orlando, told the panel, "We would very much like to see major league soccer come to Florida. It is going to go somewhere in the Southeast. We hope it's Florida and we would like it to be Orlando."

So would I.

The Legislature is entirely mindful this year -- as it should be -- of watching how the state spends incentive money. I'm a fiscal conservative, I'm going to make sure that happens. But Florida is about to overtake New York in population to become the nation's third largest state. As much as anything else, the third largest state has an obligation to the intangibles, to the image that attracts visitors and new residents, to all of Florida's citizens. To their quality of life.

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