



SportBusiness

Hail to the new stadium? Redskins long search for new facility taking many detours

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FedEx Field, current home of the NFL's Washington Redskins

Civic stronghold NFL team enjoyed for decades now overtaken by fandom for the crosstown Nationals and Capitals

Three different neighboring jurisdictions have shown at best middling ability and interest in helping construct a new stadium

Current lease for FedEx Field expires in 2027

The Washington Redskins were once the sole unifying factor in a US capital all too well known for polarization.

Democrats talked football with Republicans. Maryland, Virginia, and District of Columbia residents all bonded over the football team's success that included three Super Bowl victories from 1983-92, at the time cementing the Redskins as one of the National Football League's iconic franchises.

The civic goodwill spilled over into the Maryland suburbs when the Redskins in 1997 moved from RFK Stadium in the District to Landover and what would be known as FedEx Field.

The Redskins were always a conversational icebreaker, and a way to help forge relationships. *Hail To The Redskins*, the team's beloved Ught song, was a key part of the region's soundtrack. But the good old days are gone, just as the team is looking to find the successor facility to FedEx Field, now after a generation of use quickly falling out of date amid more modern NFL facilities.

And shockingly, an NFL team with that trio of championships and three political jurisdictions to play off each other – assets many other teams seeking help on a new facility would love to have – faces a decidedly uphill climb for its next venue.

Just a few years after all three local jurisdictions eagerly competed for the team's next stadium expected to open in 2027 when the current FedEx Field lease agreement expires, response of late has been lukewarm by each over hosting the team.

The District appears all but out after failing to gain long-term control over its only potential site, the old grounds of RFK Stadium.

Virginia is considering two sports wagering bills to support a new stadium should any major professional team relocate to the state. But the commonwealth has no suitable stadium site in Northern Virginia near the city.

Maryland statehouse leaders, meanwhile, recently listened to Redskins owner Dan Snyder's bid for a sports betting operator's license in exchange for remaining in Landover, not a surprising move given how prevalent legal sports wagering has become in the last 21 months. But no sports gambling bill in that state has been submitted.

Essentially, everybody's one-time favorite dinner guest is now cold, hungry, and alone.

The Redskins have long marketed their glory days and sustained success of RFK Stadium near Washington's eastern border. In 21 seasons before Snyder's 1999 purchase, the Redskins made the playoffs 13 times with Uve NFC Championships and three Super Bowl crowns. In 21 years since under Snyder – all at FedEx Field – the team has made just Uve postseasons with two victories, and is 51 games under the .500 mark under his leadership.

As the losses have mounted, fan support and interest in the Redskins has cratered. FedEx Field has often half-empty for Redskins games, or overrun by visiting fans feasting on cheap tickets on the resale market, or both, in turn creating an often-grim atmosphere. A season ticket waiting list the team once boasted to be in excess of 200,000 names is entirely gone.

And a recent Washington Post poll showed the crosstown Nationals, Major League Baseball champions in 2019, are now the region's most popular sports team, ending years of local dominance by the Redskins.

Changing Dynamics

Sentimental fans ache to return to the fabled RFK site that sits empty along the Anacostia River, two miles due east of the US Capitol building. The nation's first multi-use stadium was built in 1961 for both the Washington Senators of Major League Baseball and the Redskins. The Senators departed after 1971 to become the Texas Rangers, leaving the Redskins to turn the 56,000-seat bandbox into a legendary land of stands that bounced with gleeful fans under coaches George Allen and Joe Gibbs.

Former Redskins owner Jack Kent Cooke, Snyder's predecessor, only left the city-owned stadium to earn bigger money in his own venue. Ironically, he died five months before FedEx Field opened in September 1997. Cooke spent his last day alive sitting in his car at midUeld, watching construction progress on essentially a knockoff of the now-departed Giants Stadium in New Jersey that he greatly admired.

But a Redskins storybook return back into the District and where they once called home very likely isn't happening, and for a variety of reasons.

Nearly 23 years later, RFK Stadium's parking lots are overgrown with weeds while rust rings along the upper deck's exterior. The District is currently reviewing demolition bids that should see the beloved stadium razed in a little more than a year.

Days of District politicians financing the entirety of a pro sports facility, as they did across town for Nationals Park to the tune of more than \$1bn when including interest costs, are long gone. Add in a generation of losing Redskins team and the nation's capital now seems more in love with baseball and hockey than the Redskins who ruled the market for 50 years.

District leaders long waited for a deal with the Redskins. But recent failure to extend the city's lease on the federally-controlled property ending in 2038 has instead brought several alternate plans for the 190-acre site.

Meanwhile, residents in a residential neighborhood adjacent to RFK Stadium are resolute over blocking the Redskins return, and now have harnessed political power unheard of in 1961 when the facility was forced upon them.

"[The Redskins are] not coming back," says Denise Krepp, an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner representing 2,500 residents on the stadium's border. "We need affordable housing. Why would we give away land and pay the Redskins millions to come?"

"The city uses these properties as shiny rocks. The underlying frustration is you have to talk to us. You can't manipulate us anymore," Krepp says.

Furthermore, the Redskins now lack a powerful political advocate following the recent resignation of District Councilman Jack Evans over alleged ethic violations. Evans, along with the late Councilman and former District mayor Marion Barry, essentially strong-armed fellow council members 15 years ago into Unancing Nationals Park, largely through increased business taxes. But no such leadership has lined up behind the cause of Snyder and the Redskins.

At the same time, industry-wide development of new major league stadiums in the US has slowed after two decades went by between 1998 and 2017 with more than a hundred new venues opening.

Since then, Since then, the National Basketball Association added the Milwaukee Bucks' Fiserv Forum in 2018 and the Golden State Warriors' Chase Center in 2019. The NFL will open two stadiums this year – SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, Calif. for the Los Angeles Rams and Chargers and Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas for the Raiders. Major League Baseball has the Texas Rangers' Globe Life Field opening next month.

Instead, retrofitting and expanding current facilities with nearby development has been increasingly in vogue, such as what the San Francisco Giants are now doing at Mission Rock.

As those trends continue to manifest themselves, large-scale public financing of new stadiums is no longer automatic, says Victor Matheson, an economics professor at the College of the Holy Cross.

“Between 1992-2007, we had this massive wave of new stadiums,” he says. “Huge amounts of monies were spent and two thirds were public money and one third private sources. In 2008 was the great recession. People started looking and saying ‘Why are we spending hundreds of millions of dollars for billionaire owners and millionaire players when laying off teachers and firefighters?’ The funding stream has inverted. One third of stadiums since the great recession [of 2008] has been by public sources and two thirds are private.

“Stadiums do seem to cause some neighborhood effects, but those effects are limited and disappear a half kilometer from stadium. We very rarely see citywide effects so you’re pouring a lot of money at the expense of the city...There’s no reason to be extorted here,” Matheson says.

Owner Echoes

Ironically, Snyder is largely following the long, winding path that frustrated Cooke for nearly a decade, and also took that owner across multiple jurisdictions.

The previous owner held press conferences announcing plans to build a stadium in Virginia and Maryland after failing to gain a new venue next to RFK Stadium. All of those lauded venues also failed to happen. Indeed, Cooke even briefly considered moving the team to Los Angeles before finally succeeding on his fourth try at an old dairy farm just inside the Maryland beltway, but several miles outside the city.



Washington Redskins owner Dan Snyder, who has held the club since 1999 but amid long stretches of on-field losing has become one of the most unpopular owners in US team sports

As Snyder retraces many of Cooke's steps, there has been a recent and significant executive shift within the team. Snyder recently fired team president Bruce Allen, who was his lead stadium negotiator with politicians, leaving the owner himself, at least for now, to run point on the new facility talks.

Allen was considered close to Virginia leaders given his brother, George Allen, was the governor there from 1994-98. But Virginia seems unwilling to invest in a stadium after spending \$573 million to attract Amazon's new East Coast headquarters.

At best, the commonwealth's latest bill will help any potential team build its stadium through sports wagering profits rather than taxes. But it remains uncertain whether the measure will pass, or if it does, generate sufficient funds.

Maryland for many months also seemed out of the Redskins stadium chase after a recent failed land swap for federal land just 14 miles from FedEx Field that's close to the Virginia and Washington borders. Legislators in the Maryland capital of Annapolis now are largely more politically and emotionally aligned with the Redskins' regional

rival, the Baltimore Ravens, who have enjoyed far more on-field success, and whose owner, Steve Biscotti, is largely low-profile, but not reviled like Snyder among fans.

And there's also Maryland's pending bill to invest \$375 million in the state's two thoroughbred racing tracks that could largely serve to represent that jurisdiction's public-sector investment in sports for the time being.

But lady luck may have suddenly become Snyder's ally. A Maryland sports wagering hasn't been legalized, but is considered inevitable following the sweeping growth of betting following the 2018 US Supreme Court ruling allowing states to forge their own rules in this area.

Maryland legislators are weighing whether to have a state referendum in November regarding betting. In the meantime, Snyder sweetened his position by reportedly offering to use minority-owned businesses and build his new stadium near his current one without significant state subsidies.

FedEx Field was geographically isolated when opening in 1997. It's now bordered by housing on one side, but still offers potential commercial development on the northern edge. That's the key selling point to building a new stadium adjacent to the current facility, much like several NFL teams have done in recent years in markets such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New York, and New England.

"The national trend is stadiums are viewed as a new frontier of economic development and mixed use to make the case of serving the public good," says John Boyd, whose The Boyd Company of Princeton, New Jersey, consults on site locations. "The stadium of the future is mixed-use, including Class A office space. This could be state-of-the-art for corporate events."

Snyder declined comment on his stadium plans through a team spokesman. The owner's approval rating is historically low among fans after amassing that 142-193-1 record during his ownership. But Boyd says a new stadium could reverse that.

"This is an opportunity [for Snyder] to rebrand himself with this new stadium," Boyd

says. “Few owners in sports have been maligned like Snyder. To rebrand himself and work with the legislature to do a stadium without public financing, which is the exception in how deals are done today, in exchange for the betting license would position this new stadium as a cutting-edge mixed-use development analogous to what we saw with [Truist Park] in Atlanta, the Raiders in [Las Vegas with Allegiant Stadium], and in Milwaukee with a beer district.

“The world is looking at Dan Snyder. But this is an awesome opportunity for [Maryland] Gov. [Larry] Hogan and Prince George’s County Executive Angela Alsobrooks. A lot of executives are on the clock. The political stakes for this are enormous. A big part of their resumes are projects like this one that come along once in a generation,” Boyd says.

Details on the Redskins’ vision for the sought-after stadium are scant aside one leaked sketch last year that showed a moat encircling the facility, a visual that quickly engendered widespread mocking on social media. Snyder has indicated a desire for a smaller facility of nearly 65,000 seats, roughly 17,000 fewer than FedEx Field, while a domed venue was discussed with state legislators.

Such downgraded facilities compared to NFL historical norms are now in favor, as Allegiant Stadium will seat 65,000 while the SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles will have 70,240.

“It’s less to do with number of seats than monetizing the experience,” Boyd says. “The stadium experience is so radically different. They’re designed of what I can do during the four-hour experience aside watching the game. It’s about bars and experiences. The game is secondary.”

For now, though, the experience is secondary to finding a location. Snyder’s best bet now appears to remain on the same site after missing a window to other venues. A sports betting license makes it look perhaps more than doable than ever should legislation be approved.

Yet, nothing is decided. Virginia’s bid in a distant suburb near Dulles International

Airport where the team has trained daily for nearly 50 years still has a weak pulse given its potential sports gaming bill, and the team's history there. Maryland might move more quickly given Virginia's sudden legislative push. But there has been no signed deal anywhere, and the wait continues.

Somehow, Snyder's path still has a little longer to go.

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