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## THE REPLACEMENTS

Which locality has the best field position for a new football stadium? Take a look.

By Alex Koma – Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal  
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Terry McAuliffe, never shy about playing the zealous salesman, had a mere six months left in his term as Virginia’s 72nd governor when he made a bold declaration: The commonwealth would be the future home of the Washington Football Team.

Or so he asserted in July 2017 to an NFL Network crew from the team’s Richmond training camp. That capped three years of a very public courtship of Dan Snyder’s NFL franchise to woo it away from Landover’s FedEx Field by offering up Northern Virginia sites as ideal locales for a mixed-use stadium complex. Later that day, he was even more clear about his intentions to The Washington Post. “If they were smart, and they really wanted to be Super Bowl champions, they would have that [stadium] in Virginia,” he said. “I feel very good that in the future you’re going to see this team move to Virginia.”

In the four years after McAuliffe’s proclamations about a new stadium, a lot changed. Virginia fell out of those discussions, after McAuliffe yielded his office to the considerably more low-key Gov. Ralph Northam, while D.C. and Maryland leaders mounted more aggressive stadium bids.

And all the while, much of the available land for an expansive venue in the Northern Virginia suburbs was gobbled up by new development.

But what's old may be new again. McAuliffe is back running for his old job, taking advantage of Virginia's obscure rule barring governors from serving consecutive terms, but not multiple turns in office. If McAuliffe, who has dominated Democratic primary polls and outraced his four rivals, can pull off a comeback, he just may have the chance to realize those big promises from his last term.

"What I'd always said was: We'd love to have it, but I'm not going to give you any money for it," McAuliffe said in a recent interview. "We're not putting money up for it, but if [Snyder] is willing to come in and make a personal investment, we're all for it. ... You know me, any major economic development, I will talk, meet with anybody if it creates jobs here in the commonwealth of Virginia. If it has the ability to create more affordable housing, I am always open to it."

It's a potentially "critical" moment for Northern Virginia's stadium chances, said John Boyd Jr., a principal at economic development consulting firm Boyd Co., noting that "economic development at this level is all about leadership." The football team is obligated to play in FedEx through at least 2027, so this debate could still play out for several years yet. And while Maryland is soon to see its own leadership turnover and D.C. faces congressional hurdles for its most obvious spot, neither is out of the running. If the mood in Richmond stays welcoming, there could be a true three-way race for Snyder's affections once more.

"We're still in the jockeying-for-position stage," said Neil deMause, who tracks stadium development and runs the Field of Schemes blog. "I'm sure that Dan Snyder is waiting impatiently to get moving on this again."

A WFT spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment for this article. But the franchise owner has been laying some groundwork, lobbying both the Maryland and Virginia legislatures to legalize betting. The Virginia General Assembly recently included a provision in legislation that would allow the WFT to operate a sportsbook at a future stadium, should one ever open in the state. That law also cleared the way for the team to partner with FanDuel to enter Virginia's nascent mobile betting marketplace in late January, a move that was broadly seen as another stadium enticement.

Sen. Chap Petersen, D-Fairfax, a longtime backer of the team, said lawmakers have consistently told Snyder of their support for a stadium, so long as it's "a mixed-use, self-sustaining environment, not a FedEx model with a big bowl in the middle of a parking lot." Petersen added that "everything shut down" around stadium discussions when Covid struck a year ago, but the recent sports betting activity has revived some interest.

"The Washington Football Team knows that the commonwealth is not going to build them a stadium, but we thought we could do some things on the margin to be welcoming," said Del.

Mark Sickles, D-Fairfax, and a sponsor of the sports betting legislation. “And we would welcome that major development that Mr. Snyder is talking about to go with the new stadium.”



*A site near the Loudoun Gateway Metro station could be a prime spot for a new WFT stadium, as it's largely been shut off from residential development thus far. Eman Mohammed*

McAuliffe’s original pitch for a new stadium centered chiefly on sites along the Silver Line’s pending extension into Loudoun County — any future proposal could well involve the booming suburb as well, especially because the team is already headquartered in Ashburn.

The challenge is that development hasn’t stood still in the ensuing years. The land around the future Metro stations is some of the most coveted in the entire region, and developers have snapped up many of the large parcels that could reasonably accommodate a stadium.

Take the land around the old Center for Innovative Technology campus, not far from Dulles International Airport and the future Innovation Center station. A group of developers controlled it for years, but were unable to get a project off the ground, making it perhaps an ideal fit for a stadium. But after buying the CIT campus, those same developers have formulated an ambitious, 4 million-square-foot mixed-use plan for the site and won rave reviews from county officials, leaving little room for a stadium.

The Waterside campus, just north of the CIT, is another possibility, as Chantilly Crushed Stone is still in the early stages of building its own 5 million-square-foot project after Loudoun supervisors approved plans there in 2015. The challenge at any site, however, is bringing county officials on board.

“It would need to be additive to what we already have in place,” said Buddy Rizer, Loudoun’s economic development director. “There can’t be a sea of parking, or anything like that.”

A prime option could instead be the Loudoun Gateway station, located a few miles north up the Dulles Toll Road from the CIT properties. Development hasn’t been nearly as swift there as it has been around the county’s other Metro stations, and its location under the flight path of jets bound for the airport has thus far made it untenable for residential development.

“You really feel like you could throw a baseball and hit the tip of a runway there,” said Tony Howard, president and CEO of the Loudoun Chamber of Commerce. “So a stadium would really be the greatest potential use of the property. How many halfway decent sites near Metro even exist right now?”

Howard believes McAuliffe was pitching the Gateway site to the team four years ago. But Rizer has his doubts about its suitability lately, noting that much of the land has already been sold — county records show that data center developers own a good deal of it — and there are floodplain issues on the site.

But Howard doesn’t think that forecloses the possibility of a stadium there, considering what the team’s arrival could mean for Loudoun. “Loudoun’s already got the data center industry, but a football stadium is of a whole different nature,” Howard said. “Let me put it this way: Data centers don’t show up on Monday Night Football.”

### **Prince William County: Gainesville’s I-66 Interchange**

Loudoun isn’t the only outside-the-Beltway county that could be receptive to Snyder’s advances. Prince William County is growing rapidly too, with access to major highways like I-66 and I-95 — though admittedly, it lacks Metro — and isn’t all that much deeper into the suburbs than Loudoun.

Board of County Supervisors Chair Ann Wheeler, D-At large, has held Prince William out as a stadium option since winning her post in 2019, and she said she was confident that “sites were discussed in Prince William County” the last time the stadium debate heated up.

“You’re just not going to be buying the land for it in central Fairfax County. The cost is too prohibitive,” said Ross Snare, chief operating officer for the Prince William Chamber of Commerce. “But we’re pretty well-positioned among all the localities.”

Local observers suggest there could be some potential sites along I-95, but with so much development there already, the best answer would likely be somewhere along I-66 to the west, especially considering the impending arrival of high-occupancy toll lanes out to Gainesville.

Consider a location like the intersection of I-66 and Route 29, exactly where those lanes end, not far from the Jiffy Lube Live concert venue. Lerner Enterprises controls a 100-acre site right along I-66, with another large vacant lot just across John Marshall Highway.

Supervisor Pete Candland, R-Gainesville, said that's the sort of area where he could imagine such a large project making sense. But Prince William has much the same problem as Loudoun — as the data center industry has boomed there too, Candland said those large facilities have “gobbled up” much of the available land in the county. Indeed, both of those sites near the I-66-and-Route 29 intersection currently have pending applications that would convert the land to data center uses, as mixed-use development plans have stalled.

“I would love to sit down with county planners to see if there was an opportunity for a big headquarters or a stadium here,” Candland said. “But if those parcels exist, you're counting on one hand now.”

Wheeler is a bit more bullish on the county's prospects, arguing that improved bus service on I-66 and service enhancements for Virginia Railway Express tied to the Long Bridge project will increasingly make the western half of the county attractive for mixed-use projects, dissuading landowners from solely pursuing data centers. Although she's encountered resistance from people looking to preserve the western end's rural past, she believes it will gradually become the sort of place that would welcome a massive project like a stadium.

Also consider the price of Prince William's land. Its plots designated for data centers ranged from \$441,000 to \$711,000 per acre last year, per county estimates. In Loudoun, prices per acre regularly exceed \$1 million and sometimes approach \$2 million. In closer-in suburbs and the District, such large parcels are rarely even available.

“We're well-positioned for the future, because we have a lot to offer,” Wheeler said. “We have the land here.”

The path of least resistance for Snyder may be to simply stay put.

He already controls about 200 acres of land surrounding FedEx Field, and has begun exploring the idea of building a new stadium on that site. Prince George's County Councilwoman Jolene Ivey, D-District 5, which includes FedEx, said Snyder briefed local leaders about his plans a little a little more than a year ago.

So no matter how good a Virginia governor's pitch might be, Landover could well provide Snyder's swiftest path to a new stadium.

## Prince George's County: The home field



*FedEx Field is the team's current home through at least 2027. Eman Mohammed*

“He doesn’t have to do anything there but get the permits and start building,” Ivey said. “It could bring more housing there. And more than just housing, it would be new shops and restaurants, which we really need here. And it would work so well with all the other development happening there.”

With the new University of Maryland Capital Region Medical Center under construction at the Largo Town Center Metro station, there is indeed new energy around the area. County Executive Angela Alsobrooks has also recently committed to spending more money to improve the Landover area’s infrastructure, with the express purpose of convincing the team to both build a new stadium and move its headquarters there.

“We look forward to extending our relationship and working with the team in support of our mutual vision to create an exciting product both on and off the field in the coming years,” Alsobrooks wrote in a statement to the Washington Business Journal.

Plainly, there is political support in the county for such a move — Ivey said she’s even been dissuading developers from proposing anything that “might not fit” with a new stadium nearby, waving off people eyeing e-commerce warehouses, in particular.

“I’m certainly holding true to my end of the bargain, and I really hope Daniel Snyder follows through and brings about development to put in there,” Ivey said.

State lawmakers have also offered Snyder the chance to set up a sportsbook at any new stadium, in a similar move as Virginia, recently sending a sports betting legalization bill to Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan's desk. But Snyder's support in Annapolis looks a bit less certain than it does in Richmond — Hogan has generally been disengaged with the issue since his attempts to bring a new stadium to Oxon Cove fell apart, and he doesn't have much time left in office anyway. Candidates are already lining up to replace him in the 2022 race for governor, but the field is still unsettled.

And then there's the simple fact that Landover remains a headache to get to for many fans, particularly those in the wealthy Virginia suburbs that Snyder hopes to reach.

"With Fairfax County and Loudoun County, you're talking about two of the richest counties in America," said Matt Winkler, director of the sports analytics and management program at American University. "So the value is there. ... The question is, how far out can it go?"

But for all the possibilities elsewhere around the region, it's difficult for any site to match the allure, and the symbolism, of the old RFK Memorial Stadium, including for the team's owner himself.

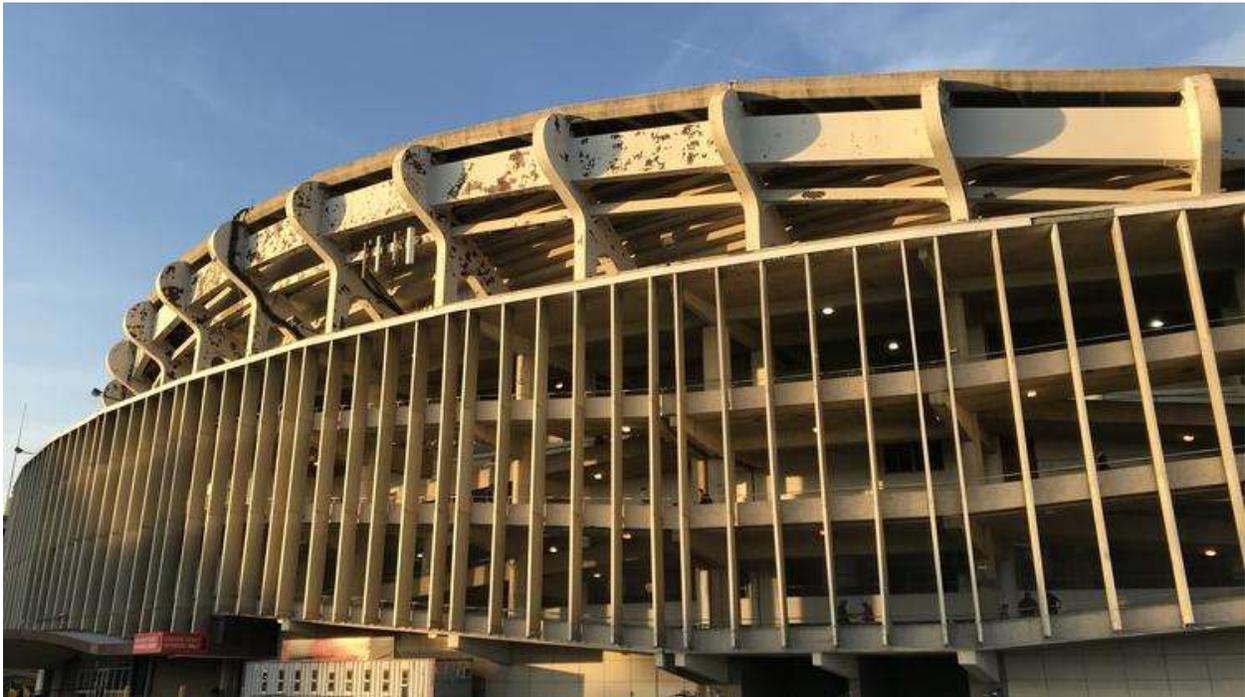
Snyder has reportedly long coveted the opportunity to bring the team back into D.C., and where better than the site of all of the franchise's former glory, the stadium where the team put together the sort of triumphant seasons that have eluded it since its move to FedEx.

He seems to have a receptive audience in Mayor Muriel Bowser, who has said repeatedly over the years that she'd like to bring the Washington Football Team back within the city limits. And the RFK property is a natural destination, perhaps the only site in the District that makes sense for a stadium.

The chief stumbling block is that the 190-acre property is federally owned, and that would probably need to change to give D.C. any hope of making a stadium redevelopment happen. Bowser has been working with Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat and the District's nonvoting representative in Congress, on a bill that would transfer ownership from the National Park Service to the city for years, without much luck.

At first, the team's former name — a racial epithet for Native Americans — was the prime impediment, with members of Congress unwilling to act on RFK if it meant the team might benefit. Norton had hoped that Snyder's decision to finally change the name last summer would be a tipping point, but her legislation has yet to budge. Even with a Democratic Congress and a Democrat in the White House, she said she hasn't been able to gain much traction.

## D.C.: RFK Stadium



*Plans to replace the crumbling RFK Stadium have been long delayed. Drew Hansen*

“D.C. has been willing to purchase it all along — just name your price,” Norton said. “But even that name change does not appear to be enough to have earned us support.”

For now, Norton’s bill is sitting in the House’s Natural Resources Committee, which oversees the park service. Norton said she’s written to the committee chair, Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., desperate to know what it would take to get the legislation moving. But she said there’s been no reply thus far — a spokesman for Grijalva did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

However, Norton expects that some of Grijalva’s concerns stem from the recent allegations of rampant sexual harassment of female team employees — he had mentioned the team’s “reputedly toxic management environment” in a statement to the Washington Business Journal last year. Norton believes the recent reports implicating Snyder himself in sexual misconduct cases have not helped matters either, though Snyder has denied any involvement or wrongdoing, saying he’s working to fix the team’s culture.

Bowser has been adamant that the city would pursue a mixed-use redevelopment of the site if it got control of the land, which does not necessarily need to involve a stadium. But Norton believes the two issues have become inextricably linked in the minds of politicians like Grijalva — she does not believe he’ll act on the bill until the attorney investigating the sexual harassment claims releases a report on the matter.

She does have some hope, however, that the city's progress redeveloping Hill East's Reservation 13, which surrounds the stadium site, could show her skeptical colleagues what could be possible if they untie the District's hands.

"Hill East is moving," Norton said, "and this all part of the same package."

### **How a deal could get done**

Even with the controversy around the team's name behind it, it's still no certain bet any locality here will be eager to build it a new stadium.

"People are never excited to give tax money to owners — especially angry sports fans," deMause said. "Thirty years ago, it was much more common for an owner to go to a city council or a state legislature and say 'Hey, give me money for a new stadium.' That looks terrible now."

But that's not to say that stadium deals don't happen anymore. Instead, deMause said they tend to involve the "kitchen sink" approach, meaning that owners propose building a whole host of new community amenities alongside a stadium to justify tax breaks or public money — hence, Snyder's insistence on a mixed-use approach this time around.

"The finances become so blurry that no one can figure out who is subsidizing what," deMause said.

It's likely Snyder will pursue such an approach locally. The region's local officials are pretty unanimous that direct public funding is off the table, a sentiment echoed by McAuliffe and other statewide politicians. But that doesn't mean that the winning locality couldn't offer up the equivalent of the Amazon HQ2 model — rather than giving subsidies directly to the massive tech company, Virginia officials offered to build a slew of valuable transportation improvements around the campus. A stadium would likely require similar infrastructure, especially in the suburbs.

"It gets really, really tough to just say, 'We're going to give away the store,'" said Buddy Rizer, Loudoun County's economic development director, pointing to the need for more of a partnership focused on community benefits.

DeMause noted the Las Vegas Raiders, Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta Braves all secured hefty transportation improvements around their new facilities, in part because they were built in previously hard-to-reach areas.

But he laments those efforts were still slanted in the favor of owners, as they often came alongside hefty tax breaks or even stadium operating subsidies. He's hopeful that the arguments some economists have been advancing for years about the limited economic benefits of stadium projects are starting to break through.

Economic development professionals like John Boyd Jr. of Boyd Co. harbor no qualms about recommending these projects. He argues a new stadium would catalyze a “wave of development,” especially in a suburb with some available land left around it. He points out: “This would be one of the first stadiums in this new era of legalized sports betting.”

### **Where Virginia’s politicians stand**

Virginia’s governor race will be the first domino to fall this year in determining the politics of a Washington Football Team stadium deal.

Terry McAuliffe, a front-runner for now, has been vocal about his support, and pursuit, of a stadium.

As for the others? The Washington Business Journal reached out to all of Virginia’s gubernatorial candidates from both parties to ask their opinions on a new stadium in the state. Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax was the lone Democrat not to respond, while only one Republican responded. Those in GOP contention are: State Sen. Amanda Chase; former House Speaker Del. Kirk Cox; retired Army Col. Sergio de la Pena; former think tank executive Peter Doran; former Roanoke Sheriff Octavia Johnson; tech entrepreneur Pete Snyder and former Carlyle Group executive Glenn Youngkin.

### **Democrats**

*“I’m open to conversations with all sides on that. But any stadium decisions need to have very broad community conversations to look at not just at the economic development side, but the impact on the community side. I will take a holistic approach to the stadium issue, like anything else I would handle as governor.” — **Sen. Jennifer McClellan***

*“If they want to come here with their own money, fine. But using public dollars for a private stadium is something I will never support. Period.” — **Del. Lee Carter***

*“I’m always interested in bringing more economic development to Virginia and, for us, having another sports team here will garner more business and increase our hospitality and retail. I will absolutely be Virginia’s No. 1 promoter. It’s my job to bring and drive high-paying opportunities to Virginia. I’ll be ensuring people know Virginia is the best place to have your sports team, your business, your headquarters.” — **Former Del. Jennifer Carroll Foy***

### **Republican**

*“As a lifelong NFL fan and longtime member of Virginia’s business community, I’m excited to work with the Washington NFL franchise to expand their home and footprint in the commonwealth. On top of that, when I become governor, Virginia will return to being a bastion of free of speech, and I am certain generations of their fans would welcome a return to their historic Redskins roots should they choose to do so in a new Virginia stadium. Cancel culture will never dictate public policy or business development in the Snyder administration.” — **Pete Snyder***