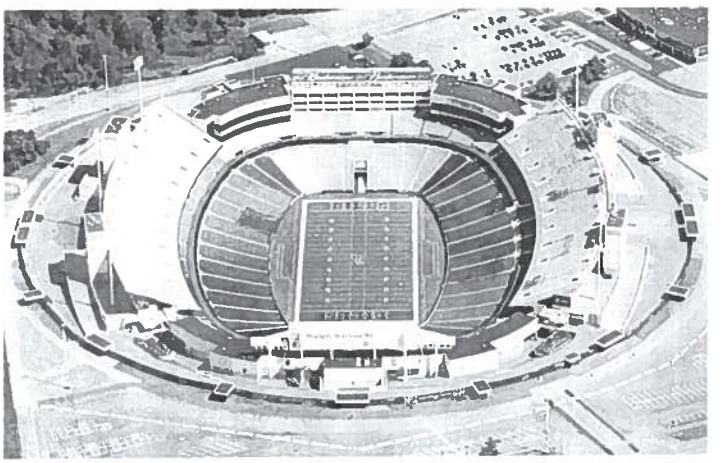
ECLEG APR16'12 AM11:58



Ralph Wilson Stadium "has the best sight lines in the NFL, bar none," says Bills CEO Russ Brandon.
Derek Gee / Buffalo News

What's the Bills' game plan?

Significant outlay of public dollars will be needed for upgrades to nearly 40-year-old stadium

By **Mark Gaughan and Denise Jewell Gee**

Published:April 14, 2012, 10:40 PM
38 Comments

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Google
- Reddit
- Delicious
- Stumble Upon
- Digg
- Fark
- MySpace

Recommend

Tweet 0

Updated: April 15, 2012, 1:39 PM

The Buffalo Bills are proposing a renovation of Ralph Wilson Stadium rather than a more extensive "gutting of the building."

It's expected the cost of the stadium renovation the Bills want will be a little bit more than $200 million, according to a source familiar with the Bills' stadium study. That is a similar sum to the total amount taxpayers put up the last time the lease was negotiated.

"If you walked into this building in 1973 as a general fan, it's not a heckuva lot different," Bills Chief Executive Officer Russ Brandon said. "By NFL standards, our building is old. It needs to be updated. It needs to be refreshed."

Brandon would not disclose the projected cost of the renovation but said talk of a $100 million price tag is way too low.

"The number $100 million has surfaced somehow," Brandon told The Buffalo News. "That was an uninformed, uneducated figure. That number did not come from us. This will be well north of that."

The Bills hired Populous, an architectural firm based in Kansas City, Mo., to study the Orchard Park stadium ahead of negotiations to renew a lease agreement for the county-owned stadium that expires July 2013.

Formal discussions with Erie County officials already have begun.

"The Populous study is very, very close to its completion," Brandon said. "We're fine-tuning a few things, but we're there."

The Bills haven't yet delivered the full study to Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz and his staff.

"[But] they've had a significant peek under the hood," Brandon said.

Poloncarz, through a spokesman, declined to comment on the county's ongoing discussions with the Bills.

What the Bills propose at the negotiating table will likely come with a significant request for public dollars.

The last deal reached between the Bills and Erie County, a 15-year lease, called for a $63 million state-funded renovation and annual upgrades paid for by the county that have totaled $38.3 million.

The total cost of that deal to the public was $212 million, according to a Buffalo News calculation based on information provided by the state and the county. That includes construction costs, game day expenses, stadium maintenance, rent payments picked up by the state and annual payments to the Bills.

Brandon said the Bills and Populous did a thorough investigation of three stadium options: building a new stadium, "retrofitting" the current stadium and renovating it.

They've since zeroed in on a renovation that would include key elements of what the Bills think is needed: structural improvements to keep the facility viable, infrastructure improvements to bring the stadium up to modern technology needs, and a total renovation of the exterior gates and paths around the stadium.

Landscape has shifted

That would mean moving the stadium gates much farther out, making it easier to get in and out of the stadium and creating communal areas for fans to gather around the stadium, which would include better access to concessions and restrooms.

"This renovation would be the first true renovation that would be really geared toward the entire fan base," Brandon said. "When you think about the last time, it was suites and club seats. It was keeping up with today's NFL in terms of revenue."

Brandon said the average NFL stadium is 1.6 million square feet. Ralph Wilson Stadium is 900,000 square feet.

The Bills are making the case for a stadium renovation amid an NFL landscape that has changed dramatically since the team last struck a deal. Sixteen new stadiums have been built. Four others have undergone major construction.

Stadium technology has "taken many leaps" since the last major renovation at Ralph Wilson Stadium, with teams seeking more revenue-producing amenities and upgrades to everything from video boards to concession stands, said Marc Ganis, a stadium consultant and president of Sports Corp. Ltd.

"The only thing that hasn't changed very much is the geometry, where the best seating is and that kind of thing," Ganis said.

The Populous study weighed the cost of constructing a new stadium for the Bills.

"When we looked at the new stadium, we rejected the concept for several reasons," Brandon said. "New stadiums cost anywhere from $800 million and north. What's usually involved is substantial public and fan participations, such as PSLs."

Personal seat licenses are used in many new NFL stadiums. They require the purchase of a license, usually for thousands of dollars, for the right to purchase a season ticket.

"You'd have to look at new revenue sources, new dedicated taxes to service bonds, etc.," Brandon said. "We think when you look at the location of our stadium and the culture of our fan base that it would not be in the best interests of the community."

The price tag of rebuilding stadiums has also escalated since Ralph Wilson Stadium saw its last major renovation.

In Kansas City, where the Chiefs play at Arrowhead Stadium, nearly $400 million was spent to completely retrofit nearly everything but the stadium bowl.

About $295 million went into constructing an indoor atrium, adding extra seats and updating private boxes at the Packers' Lambeau Field.

At Ralph Wilson Stadium, Brandon said, a retrofit would give the stadium much wider concourses. But the way the facility is constructed, the cost would be great to knock all the walls out.

"In the retrofit, you're looking at $450 million to $500 million," Brandon said. "You're looking at huge public funds and bonds. Then you're looking again at PSLs and much higher ticket prices. We don't believe there's sufficient public support or sufficient fan interest in making that kind of investment."

How to pay?

How the Bills would propose to pay for a renovation to the stadium is still unclear.

"Unfortunately, there is an inverse relationship between the size of the home market and the public split of sports venue costs," said John

Vrooman, a sports economist at Vanderbilt University. "But the Bills still have to pony up their fair share."

Smaller markets, Vrooman said, often pick up a greater share of the cost because the market can't "generate the cash flow necessary for private funding."

Despite that, he said, even teams in smaller markets have paid for a larger portion of construction costs in recent years compared with deals put together in the mid-1990s amidst an expansion of the league that saw teams move from city to city.

In Kansas City, for example, the Chiefs paid $125 million toward the stadium retrofit completed in 2010.

The creation of an NFL loan program that uses shared revenue to finance a portion of construction projects has also helped ease demands at the negotiating table throughout the league, Vrooman said.

Erie County officials, who have brought on the law firm Nixon Peabody to help negotiate with the Bills, have not discussed the negotiations publicly, but have said they are studying leases in other cities — including Green Bay, Kansas City and Jacksonville — to understand current trends in stadium deals.

Populous, formerly known as HOK Sports, designed Buffalo's Coca-Cola Field as well as some of the nation's prominent sports venues, such as Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore, Jacobs Field in Cleveland and Heinz Field in Pittsburgh.

"Populous has done more stadiums than anyone," Brandon said. "You look at the four main elements that they talk about. We're 1 for 4."

"They talk about seating-bowl intimacy. Check. We have the best sight-lines in the NFL. They talk about wide, spacious concourses. Connection to the on-field event both through technology and being able to see the game while you're getting a hot dog. And they talk about communal gatherings in the building. We do not have those. But through the renovation, we feel we can greatly improve that experience for our fans."

The Bills have not yet gone to Albany to discuss the study, Brandon said. However his meetings with Poloncarz have included Sam Hoyt, senior vice president for Regional Economic Development of the Empire State Development Corp., Brandon said.

Ultimately, the lease would be signed with the county and the state development agency.

"We have not made a proposal of any kind," Brandon said. "We have discussed and will continue to discuss the renovation concepts with them. We're confident we can come to a lease agreement that works for everybody involved."

mgaughan@buffnews.com and djgee@buffnews.com

Comments

SORT: NEWEST FIRST | OLDEST FIRST

Yes a Downtown Open Dome Stadium would be costly.... Ralph Isn't a historic Stadium like the rock Pile So move downtown....-Extend the Metro rail there-Underground parking-The other thing to do is get one of these modern set ups where the stadium holds 60,000 and you hit that game is on TV...Then other seat sections open up ... Yes when the team is bad and good you can sell the place out...-If every game is on TV you can get more ad money for the stadium... -You could if you wanted have tons of boxes to sell to companies-What no one wants to mention is what Happens when Wilson dies: Draw the contract up in a way that the team has to pay for the stadium for say 20 years... So say I buy the team and move it to Toronto well then I have to pay the lease for the next 18 years and since I Moved the team I have to pay all the up keep.... It is as if I own the stadium and if I move away I'm still the landlord so I can't let it become a boarded up home with drug dealers and drive bys....

PETER DUNN, BUFFALO, NY on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 10:02 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

I say let's do it, Rob!!!!!A new downtown retractable roof stadium will cost about $1 Billion with land acquisition. We have 19 Million people in New York State. That means it will cost $52.63 for every man woman and child in New York to pay for it. For a family of four that amounts to just over $200, that's peanuts! Just remember, our current state budget costs each man, woman and child just under $7,000 for every man, woman and child in N e
want everyone to pay "their fair share"!And d
school taxes as well too! And don't forget, Cu
other businesses in Buffalo so unless the state
State residents another $52 for every man, w t
pesky federal budget of $15 Trillion that will s
over $49,000 to pay back yet so that will cost t
forget, we have Higgins in the midst of his $1 l
rebuild the waterfront.And don't forget, we have everyone else with their hands out for better

Content was blocked because it was not signed by a valid security certificate

For more information, see

schools, parks, libraries, HEAP, WIC, Child Care Subsidies AND we gotta give everyone a free cell-phone too!But that's okay, let's plop another $1 Billion to move a football stadium 15 miles away. You can be the one to tell everyone else getting their funding cut why the Buffalo Bills are more important than all their things.

WARREN WILKES, AKRON, NY on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 09:29 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

It is interesting to read the various comments for this article, particularly those from people interested in spending HUGE $$$$ to build a stadium on the waterfront. Would it have been a great idea back when our current stadium was built? YOU BET! Should it have been a dome stadium? I think so. That would have given us a chance to bring in the Super Bowl at least once.To spend the kind of money now for a new stadium seems a tad foolish. Lets call for a show of hands - - - How many of you would pay for a ticket that is twice the cost of the present tickets? That would bring us up to the average ticket prices around the league. I am looking for the raised hands. Don't think I saw yours. It is always the big talkers that want to spend the BIG money, then they disappear when someone asks them to pony up the $$$$Have a nice day folks and don't forget to send in your five hundred million dollar donation to the Bills.

PHILIP WIGGLE, AMHERST, NY on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 09:28 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

Does the NFL make enough cash to pay for this ? They are using our tax and ticket money to be multi- millionaires. How can I screw people like this and get away with it.

MARK PIKUS, PHOENIX, AZ on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 09:09 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

Although it would definitely cost a lot more money, building a new stadium is a solid 20-30 year commitment in the area and sets an example for other business to invest in WNY. The sports mega complex will draw more business traffic from a 200 mile area including Toronto that will increase revenues well beyond the current base. If they built a retractable roof complex around the current stadium over a 4-6 year period, they may not have to temporarily relocate. If designed optimally, the stadium would be a good candidate for a super bowl and holiday games plus regional college bowl games, soccer, and baseball (alternate location/minimal cancellations due to rain or snow). The sports complex can be used in the offseason season for fundraisers, college recruiting, fitness/sports training including sports medicine/clinics, and numerous other revenue generating events. New hotels, restaurants, and other vendors could help foot the bill for a complex that could help rebuild WNY. This is where it starts...Think big or go home!!

ROB KENNERY, WILLIAMSVILLE, NY on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 09:02 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

There is no one more stupid on the face of this great earth than a major league sports fan save one. The taxpayer than funds the madness.

JT AMBROSI, PITTSFORD, NY on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 08:30 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

Wow, doesn't this all sound so familiar to all of us here in Buffalo - "No, don't build a new one, let's keep dumping money into the old one!" I for one can not see the advantage in putting more of taxpayers money into an old relic. Our teams stadium should be on the waterfront IN Buffalo, not out in Orchard Park. But of course that would be too logical and rational, two things that are NEVER used in Buffalo politics and management.

BRIAN BONAFEDE, LOCKPORT, NY on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 08:18 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

To the last comment: I don't understand the mentality of cheering a team that's not your home team. It's like your cake and eating it too. Your comments about the Bills aside, those are your own. For me, I'll always continue rooting for them and if they leave Buffalo it'll be a shame. To everyone else, this actually seems like a fair and measured proposal by the Bills (for once). In worst case, the Bills bring in as many dollars as they cost us. But the national recognition and hometown pride should tip the balance, even earning us extra economic positioning.

ALEX GUAMBANA, BALTIMORE, on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 07:58 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

As a taxpayer n Erie County I have long regretted I have to watch the Buffalo Bills as my own home team. I would much rather watch them play football as someone elses team. I know it would cost me a lot less money to watch them play in another city.It has apparent to me that over the past five decades in Western New York the growth of the values of the sports Franchises has not abetted the steep declines of the fortunes of Western New York. Curiously to this witness we have sacrificed building better schools and developing a technological and educated young people so we can construct and improve an edifice that enriches a millionaire from Detroit who, despite an occasional media blitz of adoration, obviously does not consider the team as anything more than an investment.Worse for all its investment in the Bills Franchise there is no official or even silent commitment of the team to Western New York. It is a financial unit that after some superficial payments could be moved to Peterborough, Macau or Bermuda.Despite a couple of close calls the

Bills cannot even boast a Super Bowl win and therefore must join the masses of mediocrity moiling in the trenches.The football team is an Emperor without clothes. We are beggared by the loss of industry and departure of promise of our friends and our youth and every fall we gather to cheer his Royal Nakedness back to the throne we pay for.He in turn, dumps our gold into his satchel and returns to Detroit to ponder the future.

HAP KLEIN, TONAWANDA, NY on Sun Apr 15, 2012 at 06:57 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

‹ 1 2 3 4

Add your comment

Copyright 1999 - 2011 - The Buffalo News copyright-protected material.