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Commentary

\$200 million ought to buy peace of mind

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By **Donn Esmonde**

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Updated: April 29, 2012, 8:21 AM

It looks like the Bills want \$200 million in stadium upgrades. What they didn't say goes without saying: Either taxpayers pony up, or the Buffalo Bills — like their namesake — saddle up.

Complicating the issue is an expiring 15-year lease and the mortality of the team's 93-year-old owner. Ralph Wilson reportedly has no contingency plan to keep the team here after he is gone. The Bills — valued at \$792 million — presumably would go to the highest bidder, who probably won't be from around here. A likely landing spot is Los Angeles, an NFL-covetous mega-market with wannabe owner Phillip Anschutz eager to launch a stadium project.

We know what the Bills want. Here is, to my mind, what we need:

A Lock-down Lease: A \$200 million rehab ought to tie the team here for at least 20 years. The Bills reportedly have hinted at a "clawback" deal that refunds — all or in part — stadium fix-up costs if they bolt. That's not bad. But it could leave us with a gleaming white elephant for monster truck shows.

"You need an extended lease in return for improvements," said Robert Baade, a sports economics professor at Lake Forest College in suburban Chicago. "Teams have learned how to make these arrangements less than iron-clad— like if specific revenues fall below a certain point, the deal is off. You have to watch for the loopholes."

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Of course, Wilson could craft a lease that locks the team here, with no exit doors. But the Bills are worth more somewhere else. Locking them here shaves a bit off of a still-astronomical sales price. That would be a noble gesture, given the community's half-century of support for mostly losing teams. But that, sadly, is apparently not what will happen.

Get the Bills to Pony Up: The stratospheric value of teams, and tougher economic times, have made massive stadium subsidies less digestible for governments. More teams are kicking in — with cash or shared revenue — for new or improved playpens. The Kansas City Chiefs reportedly laid out \$125 million for Arrowhead's recent \$400 million overhaul. St. Louis wants the Rams to cover half of a proposed \$124 million fix-up. In Minneapolis, the Vikings are reportedly in for \$427 million of a planned \$1 billion stadium. The Bills should ante up.

Let Albany Carry the Weight: Dennis Gorski's coup 14 years ago was getting the state to pay the \$63 million fix-up bill. The county then forked over all game-day revenue except breathing rights. That looks to me where the bar is set for Mark Poloncarz.

Hope Another Team Lands in Los Angeles: The NFL landscape is less nomadic than it was 14 years ago. Abandoning longtime NFL cities was bad PR for the league, which now slaps a hefty "relocation fee" on stake-pullers. Beyond that, a tougher economy shaved the number of cities offering everything save firstborn children to entice an NFL team. Which — to our benefit — leaves fewer places for the Bills to land.

The anxiety-provoker is Los Angeles, which wants to pirate an existing team, has a deep-pocketed prospective owner and a stadium proposal ready to launch. The L.A. threat has been used by a handful of teams to leverage new or remade stadiums. Its presence strengthens the Bills' negotiation muscle and gives the next owner a juicy relocation option.

"The L.A. card was played in Minneapolis [to land a new stadium]," Baade said, "and I'm sure it has been whispered with Buffalo. I don't see Toronto as a viable [relocation] alternative, but L.A. is a different story."

I know that fans are jacked up about next season. But the game with the highest stakes for Buffalo will not be played on the field. Let's not roll over.

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Comments

SORT: NEWEST FIRST | OLDEST FIRST

THEY DON'T NEED A NEW STADIUM!!!!!!!!!!!!this one is debt-free!.They need upgrades on this one and a committment that the Bills will stay here long term.Enough with these "Pipe dreams" about a new stadium.Fenway is 100 years old and it is the jewel of the MLB.Why because they pumped new money into it to upgrade it.Lambeau is the same.Also enough of these "Wounded Taxpayer Rants".Get a grip!.The Bills generate a huge amount of money state wide in sales tax.That is why the state will kick in money for upgrades.I agree that the Bills should contribute,but,do some research nd see how many big businesses DON'T get subsidized,don't get tax breaks,don't get free money!.People come on here and rant about Teachers,and Fireman and Police salaries.That is a separte issue.How the players don't deserve to make that kind of money!.Does Tom Hanks deserve \$25 million a movie?.Lady Gaga her tens of millions in annual income.Get a grip people!.I pay taxes also!,and alot of it goes places I don't want it to go either!.

KEVIN M DOBSON, LANCASTER, NY on Tue May 1, 2012 at 11:10 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

The Bills should build a new stadium, but they won't because they've got a great scam going. Every few years complain about having to play in an outdated stadium and get everyone else to pick up most of the tab.Also, a new stadium would put the Bills on the hot seat to contribute some serious money, and they're too cheap for that. A new stadium would give the impression that the Bills are making a real commitment to Buffalo, which they have shown over and over they don't want to do. The local fans deserve better.

Cuomo should sit down with Wilson and convince him that the honorable thing to do is make a plan that keeps the Bills in Buffalo long after he's gone.

MICHAEL DIPASQUALE, NORTHAMPTON, MA on Mon Apr 30, 2012 at 06:02 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

So we let the Bills walk away and invest in small business?.Most of those falter inthe first few years

KEVIN M DOBSON, LANCASTER, NY on Mon Apr 30, 2012 at 07:36 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

THE VIEW FROM THE BALCONYChicken feed 200 mil is chicken feed. Borrow a couple mil each from a few players. Make the parking an even 50, make the \$100 low end official NFL jerseys in CHINA instead of.....oooooppssss They are made in CHINA??? Are you sure it might be Indonesia or Pakistan or..... Lets check this out folks. The sport pays its players how much? You pay how much? Merchandise is made where?..?? ? And you want 200 mil to upgrade a stadium from who??? 200 Mil is chicken feed just print up a NEW YORKS' TEAM LOTTERY TICKET you'll have the money yesterday. this 3rd poorest city on Earth is it??? Loves to "flock" to those things.... BAHH baahhh.....bahh

MICHAEL MARTINEZ, LAKEVIEW, NY on Mon Apr 30, 2012 at 01:38 AM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

The 3rd poorest city in the Nation can't afford professional sports teams. Lets use that 200 million dollars to help small businesses. I'm not talking about small businesses that already are profitable, I'm talking about the ones that have the potential to be profitable, but are under capitalized. This would really spur job creation. We need jobs, people working, paying taxes. Most Buffalonians can't afford to take their kids to Chucky Cheese let alone spend \$150 or more to go out to the Ralph. Funding the Buffalo Bills and Ralph Wilson's Stadium is nothing more than another hand out for the affluent.

ANTHONY OVERFIELD, CHEEKTOWAGA, on Sun Apr 29, 2012 at 11:02 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

Money goes, where money grows. How much of that One Billion that Cuomo promised do the Bills want? They don't want pennies from heaven, during a recession do they.

PHILIP JAMES JAROSZ, BUFFALO, NY on Sun Apr 29, 2012 at 10:50 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

First of all, the NFL is mandating that the stadium be improved. This is the last year of the lease, and the Bills have a low buyout.No teams have "Failed" in L.A. Al Davis moved the Raiders out of Oakland to use that as a wedge to get his new stadium built. The year after the Raiders moved, Oakland approved the stadium that Davis had wanted. The Rams were lured away from Los Angeles after the Cardinals were lured out of St Louis to Phoenix. Once again, the lure was a brand new stadium. Because of USC and the Coliseum, a NEW NFL stadium has been built in City of Industry CA, which is a suburb of L.A. The stadium is built for football with large tailgating areas, Right in the middle of 15.5 MILLION residents. With 176 Luxury suites, and 12,500 club seats. <http://www.losangelesfootballstadium.com/As> for deep pockets goes the Bills will most likely go for over 1 Billion dollars. While L.A. has a deep pockets owner, they also will most likely to attract minority ownership like the Dolphins did. Did you know that J-