City Of Aberdeen

Aberdeen
Home of Opportunity

To the Citizens and Businesses of Aberdeen: 3 October 2017

The following is in reply to Aegis’ journalist David Anderson’s request for a statement pertaining to the status of extending the license agreement for Aberdeen’s Ripken Stadium:

Since assuming office in November 2015, there have been on-going discussions between representatives of the Tufton Professional Baseball, LLC, which manage the Aberdeen Ironbirds, and the undersigned City Council regarding the Aberdeen-owned Ripken Stadium. The Council’s goals have been and remain twofold: to encourage greater use of the Stadium and provide the citizens of Aberdeen with a more financially equitable agreement. Through the Summer and Fall of 2016, the members of the City Council and staff periodically met with Tufton representatives which ultimately led to a December 2016 signed one-year agreement between the City and Tufton. One year was agreed to provide both parties time to examine options in 2017. Throughout 2017 discussions with Tufton continued, again with the goal of bringing expanded uses of the Stadium along with a measure of financial relief to the citizens of Aberdeen.

A crucial component of this discussion that’s often overlooked is the cost of the Stadium to the taxpayers of Aberdeen. Since the Stadium now is 15 years old, this City Council must consider the path forward as it relates to owning an aging facility. Without becoming mired in the minutia of how millions of dollars have been and are spent, in the last five years expenses of owning and maintaining Ripken Stadium range from $700,000 to over a $1,000,000 per year.

The Stadium is owned by the City of Aberdeen through a signed 2002 agreement. The bond payment alone, which will last for nearly another four years, is nearly $600,000 per year. Furthermore, as the facility ages, so do maintenance costs. Last year, with the assistance of taxpayers from across Maryland and the City, over $1,000,000 went towards hand rail replacement and other Stadium maintenance. The City’s expenses, which are open to the public, reflect overall costs in the last five years to pay for and maintain Ripken Stadium exceed $5,000,000. For the owner of a modestly priced Aberdeen house this equates to approximately $200 per year going directly to Stadium expenses. For those owning property or homes in the $300,000 plus range the figure is closer to $400 or more per year goes directly into paying for and maintaining Ripken Stadium. This may not necessarily be the wrong or a bad thing depending on your position, but in our opinion it is something that needs to be reviewed.

There are those who opine that Harford County’s “Hotel/Motel Tax,” was/is intended to finance the Stadium but there’s no specific language in the law exclusively designating or earmarking the tax for that use. A recent report reflects the aggregate collection of the “Hotel/Motel Tax” is around $1,600,000 since its 2015 inception, but both the previous and current City Council’s placed Aberdeen’s share of the proceeds in the City’s General Fund. As part of our General
Fund, in Aberdeen those dollars have not only been used to pay for and maintain the Stadium, but to also provide citizens with the entire spectrum of municipal services. This ranges from building and maintaining Aberdeen’s streets and infrastructure, to recreational donations, police services and Fire/EMS contributions.

In our collective estimation, the primary user of the Stadium should more equitably share in the costs and expense to pay for and maintain Ripken Stadium. This Council recognizes Ripken Stadium plays a role in generating secondary revenue in places like restaurants, gas stations and hotels. There’s an overall financially positive influence attributable to baseball, but the size and share has and will be debatable. However, the extremely short ball season makes it imperative to generate revenue from non-baseball activities. There’s also an impression the youth oriented “Ripken Experience” is indelibly linked with the Stadium, but that isn’t the case. There’s certainly harmonizing activities between the Stadium and the Ripken Experience, but financially they are distinctly separate organizations.

So where does that leave the City and Tufton? This summer, Tufton representatives were informed that in absence of a new agreement for 2018, the City would revert to provisions of the 2002 Concessions Agreement. Again, without getting into voluminous detail, that essentially means for non-Ironbird events the City of Aberdeen would retain any proceeds and place them in the General Funds. Activities like weddings, luncheons, fundraisers, and even the church that regularly meets at the Stadium would rent from the City rather than Tufton. The City Council has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure the Tufton representatives were well aware that the City doesn’t want or desire to assume events management, but that would be the way forward for 2018 in absence of a new agreement reflecting more equitable cost sharing arrangement. Since that discussion Tufton has originated two offers. The most recent, presented in August, while more financially agreeable to the Council, still does not adequately address maintenance issues. That offer also raised a previously undiscussed matter related to when Aberdeen’s overall initial investment in the facility will be recouped. The majority of this Council strongly disagrees with Tufton’s analysis of the City’s investment recoupment.

Throughout September Tufton shared emails directly with every member of the City Council, yet when Council asked for the same courtesy to speak directly to Cal and Bill Ripken, we discovered from a reporter that Tufton had convened a press conference. This Council has and will continuing assuring the Tufton representatives and the Ripken’s that we understand resolving the Stadium issue is both important and time sensitive; thus the critical need for face-to-face dialogue.

The City Council has proposed several constructive solutions to address the revenue needs to maintain the Stadium. If a member of the Aberdeen City Council had been at the Tufton press conference the audience might have heard a different story. A discussion may have unfolded reflecting that for over a year, this City Council has consistently extended a hand to reach a position of better equilibrium with Tufton. This includes even retaining one of the largest facility and event management organizations in the country to discuss more equitable cost
sharing at the Stadium only to having them withdraw because a lack of progress after a few months.

Perhaps the conversation also would have included a discussion the City requested a 50 cent per ticket facility fee that would be exclusively dedicated to maintaining the Stadium, but repeatedly rebuffed by Tufton as having an adverse impossible consequences on Ironbird attendance. Maybe the City’s suggestion of a $2.00 per car parking fee, a fee for the same parking lot the City recently paid tens of thousands of dollars to resurface would have been talked about. The audience also might have heard about recommendations from the City for money generating events like flea markets, antique shows and concerts that were denied based on Tufton’s core business being baseball, yet Tufton receives into its coffers significant rental fees from weddings, luncheons and weekly church services. Finally, the press conference attendees might have also heard that the City is not only open to but would welcome “Open Records” requests for past or current agreements or emails on this matter.

In most documents from the City Council to the Tufton organization, there is a written acknowledgement and appreciation of the Ironbirds’ value to Aberdeen. The Ironbirds and Tufton Professional Baseball have positively served and contributed to Aberdeen, Harford County and to the region. Yet despite these affirmative elements, because of the Stadium’s regional impact, the idea that Aberdeen taxpayers must continue to financially underwrite millions of dollars for a facility that is sorely underutilized and aging must be reexamined.

As stated, the citizens of Aberdeen are authorized and invited to examine the record. We trust representatives of the Tufton organization will reexamine their position, without the glare of the press, but if that isn’t possible then why raise concerns when the City is simply reverting back to the original agreement?

Finally, with a nod toward full disclosure and fairness, we acknowledge and understand this approach represents a change in business as usual for Aberdeen. Times and actors have changed, and extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. Your City Council feels Aberdeen must change past practices and protocol for the greater good of our City.

Sincerely,

Patrick McGrady
Mayor

Dr. Sandra Landbeck
Council Member

Melvin Taylor
Council Member

Steve Goodin
Council Member