Birmingham's deal with Patriots doesn't add up

DERRICK Z. JACKSON

Senate President Thomas Birmingham says simple arithmetic makes the deal he struck with the New England Patriots an investment. Patriots owner Bob Kraft will build a privately funded $200 million stadium. State taxpayers would provide $72 million in infrastructure and land.

The annual state outlay for the Patriots would be $7 million. The state would get back $2.4 million in parking and ticket fees and keep $7 million in income taxes generated by player salaries. Birmingham compared the deal, more details of which he plans to unveil tomorrow, to when the state spent $83 million to lower railroad beds and refurbish bridges to accommodate double-stacked freight cars.

"We're providing the Patriots an infrastructure support that we would give many other businesses," Birmingham said. "This is completely unexceptional."

There is a major difference with comparing the Patriots to other industries, one big enough that it should still make the state take a long look before handing Kraft his corporate welfare. Services like railroads are vital to general commerce. Some irresponsible industries, like Raytheon, may be able to justify a state bailout to protect thousands of jobs in a locality, but the Patriots, an entity in which tens of millions of dollars are concentrated in the hands of an owner and 40 or so players, should not command crisis attention from the taxpayer.

Diverting $72 million to Kraft maintains the National Football League's game of artificial obsolescence. By the year 2004, if all the teams and supportive politicians get their way, two-thirds of the 30 NFL franchises will play in stadiums built or massively rebuilt, mostly by taxpayers since 1984. Of the 30 teams, nearly half have moved from facilities that were less than 40 years old. Nearly a third have moved from venues less than 30 years old.

In the United States, we prize homes that last a century or two. Other venues for entertainment still serve their functions. Carnegie Hall is 107 years old. The Smithsonian Building is 143 years old. Boston's Symphony Hall and the Museum of Fine Arts were finished in 1900 and 1909, respectively. They all needed renovations and new wings. But they still stand on their original footprints.

In the National Football League, irresponsible owners have strip-mined stadium revenue in their wild bidding for players. In 1965, the Houston Astrodome, the nation's first indoor stadium, was nicknamed the "Eighth Wonder of the World." Between 1965 and 1982, domes followed in New Orleans, Detroit, Seattle, and Minneapolis. Since then the Oilers have left Houston and either the football or baseball teams in Detroit, Seattle, and Minneapolis have declared those stadiums obsolete.

Even though the Miami Arena is only 10 years old, both the hockey team and the basketball team are departing for new separate arenas, while the taxpayers pay for the empty shell. In Cleveland, the Cavaliers basketball team bolted for the suburbs from 1974 to '94, then came back downtown to a new arena. The Washington Wizards are in a new arena after just 25 years in what was then a state of the art arena in Landover, Md.

There is no sound rationale for why the taxpayers bear one cent's responsibility for such a mentality. Kraft himself is a good example. He says he does not run the Patriots as he would a normal business. He overspent by $50 million in purchasing the team four years ago for $172 million. He is spending $42 million on a multiyear contract for a very good but hardly Hall of Fame quarterback.

He has the pockets to throw money at his problems. In 1995, different reports had him spending $4 million studying South Boston for a stadium and $2.3 million to lobby for it.

In the same year, he said he could not afford $50 million to renovate Foxboro Stadium, yet could galvanize $200 million for the megaplex. Now he is saying he can find $200 for a new stadium in Foxborough after saying for months that $50 million was all he had for a renovation.

On top of that, Birmingham's arithmetic is not that simple.

Sports economists say that when teams claim to be an economic engine, such as through income taxes, the argument does not factor in how much more the state would have gotten had it invested its money elsewhere. The total economic impact of athletes is muted because those who do not live full time in the city they play in take most of their earnings elsewhere.

"The same amount could be spent on industrial parks, local tax exemptions for new business facilities, computers for local schools, or an an endowment for a high-quality electrical engineering and computer science program at a local university," wrote Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist in the new book, "Sports, Jobs and Taxes." By coincidence, it was announced yesterday that US high school seniors finished 18th out of 21 nations in the International Math and Science Study.

Robert Baade, sports industry analyst at Lake Forest College in Illinois, added a further caution. "The shelf-life of stadiums has been so dramatically reduced, we don't know what comes next. What if an owner wants a virtual reality amusement park next door to generate more revenue? Who pays for that? Your state might be spending a dollar to get 31 cents."

Derrick Z. Jackson is a Globe columnist.

Catholic Church invites homosexuals to choose life

JOHN M. HAAS

My friend is an educated man with an earned doctorate. He is Catholic. And he is, as he puts it, gay.

One evening as we sipped hot tea in a Chinese restaurant, he leaned toward me and said, "John, you have to realize, we gays want just what you straight people want. Marriage, a family, children."

"Those are lovely sentiments, Charlie," I responded. "But don't you think God has a plan for the way families are to come into being."

"I used to," he replied. "But not anymore."

The conversation was short, but it seemed to capture the fundamental difference in outlook between those who find they can never accept homosexuality and those who consider it merely another way of living out one's life. Of course, in our conversation I used the language of a believer when I asked if my friend did not think "God had a plan." But I could have just as well asked, "Don't you think nature has a plan for the way families are to come into being?"

The Catholic church's position on homosexuality is portrayed by some as harsh and cruel. Indeed a recent opinion piece referred to it as "hurtful," "medieval," "repressed," and "contradictory." Yet it is such charges that leave those who are not homosexual baffled. To us the church's position seems merely to correspond to reality, to express the way things are, not the way some people wish they might be.

Underlying the church's teaching on homosexuality is the conviction that sex makes sense; it has a purpose, a meaning. We do not need a special revelation from God to tell us what it is.

People have only to open their eyes and their minds. The church has the conviction that humanity is divided into male and female for a reason. It reflects a design and a plan not of our own making.

The purpose of sex is so self-evident it is bewildering how some do not see it. At the most fundamental level of human existence we can see that there simply would be no perpetuation of the species without a reproductive cell from the man and one from the woman which find themselves joined in one of the most remarkable of human activities.

The church is often accused of devising arbitrary moral norms with apparently no purpose than to thwart human happiness. Yet, she is convinced that her teachings are the very opposite of arbitrary. They reflect the way things are.

The church's teaching on sexuality is really no more difficult to understand than understanding that men and women were made for one another, for love, for bonding, for engendering children and establishing a family.

Admittedly, church documents do not always explain teachings in ways that are easily understood in contemporary society. A number of years ago the Vatican issued a Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics. In it the topic of homosexual practices was addressed. Not surprisingly it judged them to be wrong and gave the following reasons: "According to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality."

BARRIE MAGUIRE ILLUSTRATION

In other words, they do not fulfill the purposes (finalities) of human sexuality.

We Catholics know that if people do not use their bodies according to nature's design, they may suffer. This is true if people overeat, do not get enough rest, drink too much, use drugs. This is certainly the case with homosexual practices. After all, there are reasons why you will find proctologists and immune disorder treatment centers advertising in gay newspapers.

Is the church being cruel by warning people to avoid practices that are proven to be harmful physically and which we believe are also harmful spiritually? In fact, church leaders believe they have a moral obligation to warn people about such practices. All her teachings are but different ways of expressing her concern for human happiness.

I know a Catholic priest who was chaplain at an Ivy League school. He was accepting all students, including those who were self-declared gays. Yet he always, with sensitivity, presented the church's teaching about homosexuality. One day a former student who had been active in the Catholic center returned to campus. The priest recounts that it was one of the worst days of his life when this young man tearfully and angrily accused him of not warning him more forcefully about the dangers of his homosexual lifestyle. Now he is dying of AIDS.

Jesus looked on the city of Jerusalem in his day and was moved to tears at the thought of the human misery within its walls. "If only you know the things which make for peace," he lamented. Today his church looks on a world in misery and with heavy heart repeats his words, "If only you knew the things which make for peace."

The church bears ill will toward no one. Certainly not homosexuals. What she desires for them is the fullness of life. That is why she warns them against those actions which have brought so much suffering and death. Quoting the Bible, the church extends an invitation to all: "Choose life."

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MARTIN F. NOLAN

3 in the ring against Boxer

BURLINGAME, Calif.

They posed no threats to the reputations of Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun, but these would-be senators are all the California GOP has got, so three candidates gave all they've got to the Republican state convention here.

State Treasurer Matt Fong, 44, introduced himself as "the chief financial officer for the world's seventh largest economy." Darrell Issa, 44, a first-time candidate who made millions selling car alarms, said, "I'm not running for a better job. I'm running for a better America." US Representative Frank Riggs, 47, tabbed himself as "a member of that vast right-wing conspiracy in Washington and across the country that wants smaller government and more personal freedom."

They agreed on most ideological matters and shared with delegates an intense frustration that fairly frothed and shimmered in the ballroom of the Hyatt Regency here. Republicans are both puzzled and furious that the incumbent liberal Democratic senator, Barbara Boxer, 57, is prospering in the polls. "She's getting a bounce tied to Bill Clinton, and his numbers are going up," Fong explained.

Some party operatives concede that their field is thin, ironically because of GOP successs nationwide. Since 1976, almost a dozen Republican House members, stymied by their minority status, have run for the Senate here. If Democrats still dominated Congress, the Burlingame debate might have featured David Dreier, Christopher Cox, and Tom Campbell. All three are now enjoying House seniority and the perks of congressional power.

Riggs, 47, was a late entry. In four elections in his congressional district near the Oregon border, he has averaged less than 48 percent of the vote. Facing a strong Democratic challenger this year, he chose to leap statewide to the Senate race.

All three are military veterans. Issa and Riggs were enlisted men in the Army, and Fong, a graduate of the Air Force Academy, was an Air Force officer. The most familiar face to the 1,000 delegates, Fong is favored by many in the party establishment because he's conservative and because his nomination and election would make the Golden State GOP look less like the preserve of grumpy white men.

Yet Fong's presentation struck many delegates as stiff. Riggs, unknown to delegates south of the Napa Valley, was accustomed to congressional banter and sauntered through the question-and-answer session. Issa, the political rookie, wooed the delegates with a salesman's savvy and charm. Fong also found skeptics who suspect his unferocious stance against abortion rights may be keyed to the November election rather than the June primary.

Riggs confessed that his libertarian beliefs once made him waver, but he won applause by affirming that "life does indeed begin at conception." New to such conventions, Riggs dismayed some by saying: "I am a 'Big Tent' pro-life Republican. I do support family planning and pregnancy prevention services." This assertion is dangerously left wing to some delegates.

Issa cultivated the antigovernment mood of the convention with an exhausting pledge to become a frequent-flying commuter, promising "a self-imposed term limit. I'll serve one or two terms and come home. And I'm going to come home every weekend while I'm there, so I couldn't possibly become part of that Beltway mentality that is ruining America."

Like many a state convention, the California GOP often indulges an appetite for sirloin tartar. But according to one candidate, they have a taste for cotton candy as well as red meat.

"Remember," Fong said the day after the debate. "this is a group of 1,000 very hardcore Republican partisan volunteers who will save up for six months and instead of going to Disneyland, will go to a Republican state convention. So a lot of last night was entertainment. The bottom line is they all want to beat Barbara Boxer."

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