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Blast out of Left Field Keeps Expos in Limbo

By Steve Cameron

PLANNING, designing and building a sports and entertainment facility is like doing a jigsaw puzzle. You can't afford to have one piece missing.

Ask the movers and shakers in Washington. If every piece had fit properly in their plans to create a baseball stadium in the shadow of the Capitol, the Montreal Expos might be playing in RFK Stadium this season -- waiting only for completion of a palatial new home.

Instead, Major League Baseball opted to leave the travel-weary Expos to suffer another year in limbo while several other cities jumped headlong into the bidding for the troubled franchise.

Maybe, just maybe, MLB decided sometime last summer to slow down the process of securing a permanent home for the Expos. Perhaps the notion of involving such cities as Norfolk, Va., Las Vegas and Monterrey, Mexico, seemed a good way to establish leverage and wring the last possible dollar out of the "winning" ownership group.

Maybe a single stumble in Washington wasn't the reason for dragging out the Expos' agony. But perhaps it was.

Well over a year ago, the District of Columbia approached MLB with a powerhouse presentation. A dream team of architects, city planners and transportation and financial experts came up with all the answers -- not to mention two or three fantastic sites for a stadium in what is now a thriving area of Washington.

"You're never completely sure in situations like this one," said Chris Dunlavey, president of Brailsford & Dunlavey, the consulting firm that coordinated the district's plan. "But we had a great city that's more than ready for the return of baseball, a solid ownership group, financing totally in place and stadium sites that were available and spectacular.

"So yes, I was confident. The only other city that had put together a real plan for MLB to consider back then was Portland (Ore.)."

But an unexpected piece fell suddenly out of the puzzle. Jack Evans, the district council's finance chairman, stunned everyone by attacking the plan. He made it plain that Washington shouldn't promise a dime or the tiniest sliver of land unless MLB first promised that D.C. had a lock on the Expos, and he ripped the entire process, insulting every MLB exec from commissioner Bud Selig on down.

"It was a bit of a shock, to put it mildly," Dunlavey said of Evans' opposition to the stadium deal.

Not long after Evans' tirade, MLB officials made it known that they wouldn't rush to find the Expos' a new home.

No one from Dunlavey to Mayor Tony Williams is certain that the timing of Evans' loud dissent led to MLB's decision. They've understood from the outset that baseball does things in funny ways. But did Washington have something pretty close to a done deal? Was MLB happily contemplating a magical \$400 million stadium, say, just south of the Capitol on the Anacostia River?

There's a lesson here: In the facilities game, you'd better make sure that everyone's playing ball on the same team.