

# The Washington Times

## Public Gets Voice on Stadium Quest

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By Eric Fisher, The Washington Times

The District's pursuit of a major league baseball franchise and new stadium took an important turn last night at Howard University Hospital: the involvement of the general public.

Over the three-decade search to replace the twice-departed Senators, the general public has had precious few opportunities to offer input on desired locations, financing and design elements of a new baseball-only stadium. With no franchise actually on the table, there was little reason to have formal public hearings of significant substance.

But with baseball's plan to eliminate at least two teams now in dire trouble, relocation considered inevitable by Major League Baseball and two local jurisdictions still jockeying to land a franchise, the District contingent has now elected to bring in the masses.

Washington Baseball Club, led by financier Fred Malek, and the D.C. Sports & Entertainment Commission last night held the first of two planned ballpark development forums at Howard, drawing more than 120 people.

Much like D.C. itself, the crowd cut widely across demographic lines and its views on baseball in Washington was nearly as divergent. Some felt preliminary plans for a baseball-only stadium seating about 45,000 would be far too small for the burgeoning local area and its passion for baseball. Others opined that Mayor Anthony Williams' standing offer to MLB of \$200 million in public-sector assistance toward a new ballpark represents a gross misuse of taxpayer funds.

"We need new schools. The public should not be asked to finance a new ballpark. That's for the investors," said District resident Leslie Thompson.

The public forums continue a formal partnership forged in January between the Malek group and the commission. After signing a two-year deal to pursue a team jointly, the two sides have met regularly to discuss stadium possibilities, hired an extensive team of consultants and began a \$300,000 research study to outline the site and financing options.

The Malek group and the commission last night did not specify any potential sites being privately considered. But the two bodies are updating a 1999 site survey done by the commission that included Mount Vernon Square, RFK Stadium, Buzzard Point in Southwest, and land near the intersection of New York and Florida Avenues as potential stadium locations. Earlier this year, Malek spoke at length about the redevelopment possibilities at and near RFK.

A final list of site candidates will be presented to MLB officials in the early fall. Shortly before that, the second public forum will be held to solicit additional citizen comment. No design work on the ballpark itself is being done at this time.

"We have literally gone as far as we can go in this process without input from the community," said Christopher Dunlavey, president of Brailsford & Dunlavey, a District-based facility planning firm hired as one of the stadium consultants.

Further input can be registered at [www.publicspace.justicesustainability.com/baseball](http://www.publicspace.justicesustainability.com/baseball).

Members of the commission and Washington Baseball Club were pleased with the forum, even amid the presence of many ardent stadium opponents and upset residents firmly believing a stadium site already has been chosen. Malek and the commission both insist no site has been selected.

"This session was immensely valuable. We've received a lot of important input, really from all over the [ideological] spectrum," said Bobby Goldwater, commission president and executive director.

The Virginia Baseball Stadium Authority, a public body, also holds regular, open meetings. But in the organization's history, the sessions have not been generally well attended, and it has jealously guarded any deliberations about potential stadium sites from becoming public.