

PAUL MCMORROW

## Baseball's a bad call at Malden site

By [Paul McMorrow](#) | JANUARY 17, 2012

A MONTH after minor league baseball in Brockton folded, officials in Malden are debating whether to turn the city's most promising redevelopment parcel into a minor league baseball park. At worst, Malden would follow a well-worn path, in which local fans tire of watching a rotating cast of players outside the major league pipeline, the team folds, and the city gets stuck with a white elephant of a stadium.

The bigger problem, though, is that even a successful stadium, on its own, doesn't make for productive urban renewal policy.

Malden officials began kicking the tires on the proposed 6,400-seat ballpark last week. The park would span eight acres, including a 6.5-acre property owned by National Grid that is directly across the street from an Orange Line station. At a public meeting last week, US Representative Ed Markey spoke glowingly about the park's potential to turn around Malden's downtown.

The city certainly needs the help: Despite being on a transit line, its downtown feels desolate, pockmarked by vacant storefronts and dollar stores. Malden Center is just four miles away from Davis Square, the Somerville neighborhood that turned subway access into an urban renaissance, but the two neighborhoods are worlds apart, economically.

There's reason to question the proposed Malden team's business prospects. Independent baseball teams have a history of flaming out around Boston. Two separate bids at running a team in Lynn failed, while the Brockton Rox just announced that they won't be fielding a team in 2012, after defaulting on a \$125,000 lease payment on their publicly owned stadium.

Plummeting attendance and an eroding season ticket base caused Brockton's team to run out

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*Independent baseball teams*

of cash; attendance averaged a third of stadium capacity over the past two years. So it's potentially worrisome that the the proposed Malden team is counting on an aggressive 77 percent attendance rate, on a higher ticket price than Brockton. The \$36 million ballpark will also mean Malden's team would be carrying a much higher debt load than failed teams in Brockton and Lynn.

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The Malden ballpark's prospective developer, Boston lawyer Alexander Bok, speaks passionately about bringing affordable baseball to Boston. He worries about losing a generation of new baseball fans to Fenway Park's prices. He says a stadium on the Orange Line will draw families from across the region. He oozes earnestness. But even if he succeeds where other independent league owners have repeatedly failed, his stadium will still represent a regressive use for what should be a prime development opportunity.

Silver bullet development doesn't work. Big, stand-alone commercial developments can't save struggling neighborhoods. Failed downtown malls in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield show that dynamic all too well. It takes people to breathe life into neighborhoods. Urban spaces prosper when they're full of residents with money to spend, and they decay when they're emptied out. Economic development happens on fine-grain, walkable streets, dense block by dense block. With large acreage and immediate transit access, Malden's National Grid site is crying out for a substantial apartment and shopping complex, not a ballpark that draws a few thousand fans 70 nights per year.

This isn't revolutionary stuff. Jane Jacobs was saying it 50 years ago. But building or rebuilding the type of neighborhoods Jacobs upheld can still be a struggle. Building vibrant neighborhoods is slow, hard work. It takes vision and lots of patience. And, in the case of post-industrial cities, it also takes money.

National Grid's downtown Malden property has been occupied by coal and gas companies since before the Civil War. Its soils are soaked with tar and other pollutants that have to be cleaned up before the site can be redeveloped. It's an expensive proposition, but it's not unusual. River's Edge, an office and apartment complex down the street from the National Grid property, was a toxic dumping ground for years.

Making the National Grid property safe for residents would cost more than the ballpark

cleanup. Still, the cost of cleaning up the property is far less than the cost of squandering the city's most promising transit-oriented redevelopment opportunity. From Assembly Square in Somerville to expansive redevelopment projects in Worcester, Quincy, and Lowell, residents are starting to see the rewards in demanding a substantial, neighborhood-building approach to urban revitalization. Malden shouldn't squander its best shot at following suit.

*Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at CommonWealth magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.*