

Pioneer/Nichols Sports Management Policy Case Competition:
Polar Park Policy Statement

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November 5, 2020

Background

The Worcester Red Sox, a Minor League Baseball team in the Triple-A International League, are soon relocating from Pawtucket, Rhode Island to their new home of Polar Park. The Triple-A affiliate resided in Pawtucket, Rhode Island's McCoy Stadium for nearly 50 years, and in 2018 decided to move 42 miles north to the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. Polar Park stadium will be the new home for the team; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has created significant problems for Worcester's new franchise. The construction of the facility was put on hold, April through May of 2020, due to the first wave of COVID-19. Consequently, the 2020 Minor League Baseball season has been cancelled, leaving the 2021 season plans in flux. Completing construction will be a challenge with the second wave of COVID-19 in the United States. A rapid incline of new cases can be expected in November with the prediction of "450,000 to 960,000 new cases will likely be reported during the week ending November 28, 2020" (CDC, 2020, para. 2).

Proposed Solutions

Finishing the construction of Polar Park is the main goal leading up to a potential 2021 Minor League Baseball season. The stadium is projected to open on time for the 2021 season, as long as COVID-19 case numbers do not increase dramatically and further delay construction. As of October 27th, the sod has been installed in the park, which is a reassuring sign that the construction is proceeding according to plan (CBS Boston, 2020). Shutting down the construction due to COVID-19 complications is perhaps the only obstacle standing in the way of the park's completion, so precautions are critical in order to complete the park on time. In order to maintain the viability and timeliness of construction, all park employees should closely follow

OSHA's recommendations to maintain their wellbeing, including wearing masks over noses and mouths and encouraging workers to stay home if they are sick (OSHA, 2020). The 'WooSox' should consider alternatives given the chance construction will be put on hiatus again.

The first option which the 'WooSox' should consider is renewing the lease with McCoy Stadium, their previous home field. In July 2020, the Pawtucket Red Sox deferred the sublease at McCoy Stadium beyond January 31, 2021 (Pawtucket Times, 2020). Renewing the lease for the year may be a viable option. The cost of the yearly lease would be approximately \$37,000, based on previous years, which is an affordable choice for the team (Rhode Island Senate, 2017). However, this option does not seem probable, as the 'WooSox' have very recently hosted farewell celebrations at McCoy Stadium, indicating that their relationship with the ballpark is officially over.

Another option the 'WooSox' should consider is playing out the 2021 season, or at least part of the season, on the road. This option will be mentally and physically demanding for the athletes and staff because of the non-stop travel; however, it is a viable option. If the construction of the stadium is delayed for another five weeks, it is possible to play about 30 games on the road and return to Polar Park for the remainder of the season.

It is highly encouraged for Worcester to complete construction on Polar Park and prepare for a 2021 season. As COVID-19 continues to have a devastating impact on the world of sports, Polar Park and Worcester need to consider pathways to prosperity. Currently, stadiums are allowing 10%-25% fan capacity, thus revenue generated from ticket sales is going to be a fraction of the projected value. Polar Park should not rely solely on ticket sales, as the pandemic is still unpredictable. They should focus on a variety of long term solutions in order to bring affluence to Worcester and Polar Park.

Community Engagement and Buy-In

Recruiting Worcester's community should be a main goal for both the city and the team. There are many ways to draw in Worcester's diverse community, including partnering with local businesses, offering employment and internship opportunities, and having theme nights at games. A completed stadium would allow for the city of Worcester to use the park for a number of community events, making Kelley Square a popular destination.

One way to increase interest in the Kelley Square area is to hold non-baseball community events at Polar Park. While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted almost all aspects of life, there are still socially distant options for events. The DCU Center normally holds commencement for many of the local colleges. With COVID-19 rates rising, holding commencement at the DCU Center is appearing unlikely; however, Polar Park could be an alternative open space to hold commencements. Having college commencements at Polar Park allows students an opportunity to experience graduating in person and in the presence of their loved ones, compared to online. Polar Park will also have the ability to broadcast the graduation for those not able to attend. Temporary advertising over jumbotrons during commencements can be utilized, drawing attention to local businesses, the ballpark, and Kelley Square. This opportunity will allow a strong relationship to form between the community and surrounding colleges.

The park can also host other special events that will increase revenue such as Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, weddings, award shows, meetings and conferences, banquets, and other various social gatherings. Providing guests with the opportunity to rent out stadium bars, rooms, and luxury boxes is a great source of income for the park. Polar Park has previously noted that the stadium will host 120 events on an annual basis. They have already done an excellent job formulating

season ticket costs and additional amenities that are included in that cost. These membership options should be incentivized and marketed to local schools, sports teams, and recreation facilities, whether it be town recreation departments or YMCAs. This way Polar Park is gaining more exposure, commitment, and buy-in from the community. Many concerns have risen regarding how the stadium will be paid for and if the public will be responsible for funding the project, therefore, it is very important that the public be made aware of the vast amenities Polar Park will offer for the community and how their commitment to trusting the initiative of Polar Park and their staff will continue to allow the park to flourish and pay for itself.

There is a clear relationship between a sports team and the city that houses it. Using Boston as an example, the local professional teams and athletes will interact in person and on social media all the time. This is a great way to foster a ‘we’re all in this together’ mentality. With the Worcester Red Sox, Worcester Railers, Massachusetts Pirates, and Worcester Bravehearts, there are many opportunities for cross promotional events within the community. Holding events with the other teams in Worcester can expose fans to multiple sports. Local teams could collaborate to hold socially distant and COVID-friendly events at nearby Green Hill Park. The Worcester Red Sox could take a page from another local minor league baseball team, the Hartford Yard Goats. In recent years, the Yard Goats have hosted “Goat Yoga” at their home field Dunkin Donuts Park. Polar Park could discover a similar entertainment option to give to fans. This is a great way to get members of the community active, and in some cases introduce them to the ballpark and franchise.

Due to the large population of college students, internships can be a great way for students to gain field experience. Interning with a professional sports team can provide valuable hands-on experience in a number of areas including business administration, communications,

marketing, and sport management. An internship with the 'WooSox' will be a coveted position with a high number of students applying. As time goes on, local colleges and universities will have an influx of applications of students who want to have this internship experience as part of their education. The increase in popularity of these schools because of their partnering internships with Polar Park will ultimately result in a boost for the Worcester economy, benefiting both the park and city itself.

Personalizing the Stadium

The city of Worcester is historical to the baseball community. It has rich grass roots as it is home to the first perfect game in professional baseball history. Creating a unique environment within the Polar Park stadium that incorporates baseball and city history as well as community pride is key for community and fan engagement.

In order to attract out-of-city guests, the park has to be a memorable destination that keeps the fans coming year after year. Personalizing the stadium to reflect the city of Worcester will be beneficial for both locals and visitors, who will be greeted with Worcester's culture upon arrival to the stadium. Reciprocity will be key in creating an intimate bond with the fans. Allowing fans to customize their ballpark would create an extremely engaging relationship and would allow fans to have a deeper connection to the stadium. Polar Park's architecture needs to allow for the fans to express themselves by giving them control over a section of the ballpark. Constructing a prime section with a minimalistic infrastructure will give fans a shell for customization (Hines, 2020). Fans of the 'WooSox' will continue to return and add their personal touch, turning Polar Park's blank canvas to an original piece of artwork that the city of Worcester can take pride in.

Worcester is one of the biggest college cities in the country, housing 9 colleges and universities. Students make up nearly 20% of the 182,000 person city. The student population is enough to fill up the stadium three times, so it will be incredibly useful to create a strong bond with the students and their universities. Personalizing the stadium can be done with the help of the student body, through a contest which will give students the opportunity to display their artwork depicting pride in their city within the stadium walls. Community driven art and architecture will allow the ballpark to best reflect and involve the Worcester community.

Health Initiative and Bicycle Infrastructure

The construction of Polar Park will give Worcester a stronger tie to health and sports, however it should not stop there. Polar Park's completion can be a catalyst for a health initiative in the city of Worcester. A great way to both augment public health and stimulate economic activity within the city is to create an extensive bicycle/walking infrastructure. As proven in a number of cities across America, "bicycling projects create twice as many construction jobs per dollar as road projects, cities are discovering that bicycling investments are a cost-effective way to build infrastructure and create jobs" (Flushe, 2012, p. 1). Bicycling is cost effective, good for the environment, and a great way to make the community more active. Creating an extensive bicycle/walking infrastructure in the city will also create many jobs, make population movement throughout the city much more efficient, and will boost local businesses. Such infrastructure is much more cost efficient compared to road construction, as it requires less materials. While being cost efficient, it also creates more jobs per dollar than road projects. There are simple principles that make city biking appealing: if there is appealing biking infrastructure in the city then people will buy bikes and accessories from their local shops, people are more likely to repeat trips to their local stores, and with more money saved from the lower cost of

transportation, people can invest more money in local businesses (Flushe, 2012). A 2009 Study of Bloor Street in Toronto, Ontario showed that people who biked and walked to the area spent more money compared to those who drove there. Along with that, the study concluded that the bike lanes “would be unlikely to harm local businesses and predicted that commercial activity on the street would increase” (Flushe, 2012, p. 10). An example of a city that saw success with bicycle infrastructure is Portland, Oregon, which has been designated a Platinum-level Bicycle Friendly Community. Portland saw \$90 million in economic activity in 2008, with “nearly 60 percent of that activity [coming] from retail, rental, and repair” (Flushe, 2012, p. 8).

Worcester has an opportunity to create an infrastructure that will not only benefit the access to Polar Park but will spur economic growth and population health throughout the city. Creating Bike Corrals will increase available parking space near businesses, providing them with more customers. Bike Corrals can “provide up to 12 bicycle parking spaces in place of one car parking space” (Flushe, 2012, p. 14), making them extremely efficient for high traffic public areas. Bicycle friendly communities show that even modest investments such as paths, expanded shoulders, and trails help boost local economy, travel, and public health. Polar Park can be a great start in health initiative, which will make Worcester an appealing travel and business destination. Post COVID-19, the creation of a bicycle sharing system, similar to Boston’s Bluebikes, will further increase economic activity due to its efficiency in transportation for those who might not own a bicycle. Current epidemiological concerns would not allow for this system currently due to sanitation protocols, but as the health of the world improves, this system can become extremely popular.

Public Transportation

Public transportation is a mainstay in all major cities, and Worcester is no exception. Encouraging the use of public transportation is a great way for Worcester to collect additional revenue. Worcester currently has an adequate public transportation system; however, improvements could be made to create more direct access to Polar Park and Kelley Square.

Polar Park and the city should direct their attention to college students and their transportation needs. Most college students do not have access to a car, so public transportation is a necessity. The city and Polar Park should create a public transportation fare strictly for Worcester Red Sox games. According to the Worcester Regional Transit Authority's website, a full cash fare for adults 14 and up is \$1.75 (WRTA, 2020). Creating a "Polar Pass", which could offer a round trip ticket for less than a normal fare, giving college students an affordable option for a fun night at the ballpark. The "Polar Pass" could also appeal to local Worcester residents, offering different pricing levels, from a one game pass to a full season pass. As a bonus, the team could offer "Polar Pass" holders exclusive items, such as a free drink, hot dog, or in game promotions like the "Polar Pass holder of the game". This would generate a new wave of revenue for the Worcester transportation system, further improving the local economy while providing affordable ways to attend games.

Another accessibility option is creating a shuttle system for college students. Getting students to games and having them spend money at businesses around Polar Park could not only increase revenue, but also create excitement around Kelley Square making it a popular destination for college students in Worcester not only on game days, but year round. Maneuvering through Kelley Square with public transportation can be a hassle. For example, a bus trip from Worcester Union Station to Worcester State is about 36 minutes and does not

include the walk from Worcester Union Station to Kelley Square. A dedicated shuttle system can be designed to bypass other stops and strictly go from the college to Polar Park or from Worcester Union Station to Polar Park. There will be initial costs to implement the system, but the payoff will be immense. In the long run, the presence of college students at Kelley Square can create a lively atmosphere that will draw in local Worcester residents and residents from surrounding towns and states. Partnering with Worcester Union Station and local universities would be an excellent opportunity for Polar Park.

Taxes and Partnership Opportunities

Gaining the trust of the community is an essential aspect to the stadium's success in Worcester. In the words of Worcester city manager, Edward M. Augustus Jr., the stadium "will continue to pay for itself" and no "existing taxpayer money will be diverted to pay for it" (deMause, 2020, para. 5). Making sure that this notion is expressed to the public is vital to gain their trust and support.

Partnering with businesses in the community will also give Polar Park an opportunity to gain extra revenue that can be used to pay for the stadium. The Worcester community contains an array of sports stores that could be willing to carry 'WooSox' apparel. By partnering with surrounding sporting goods stores Polar Park will be able to form personal relationships and acquire income that they wouldn't normally be able to if they only had a gift shop located within the ballpark. Executives at Polar Park might also want to investigate partnering with the surrounding universities and discovering if there is a possibility to sell team apparel and goods at their respective school stores. Along with partnering with local sporting goods stores, "WooSox" can look at partnering with local bicycling shops to add a revenue source for the ballclub and promote a healthy lifestyle.

In addition to partnering with local sporting goods stores and universities, we strongly encouraged Polar Park to reach out to local businesses and restaurants to formulate promotions and deals that would assist in having the stadium pay for itself. Such deals would include, offering bar and restaurant promotions and student or senior citizen discounts. Creating incentives such as “10% off for senior citizens” or “25% off with a student ID on Friday’s” has the potential to draw in members of the surrounding community and keep them coming back. This is an opportunity to increase the economy within the stadium and the private sector by promoting and fostering consumer retention rates.

It is also suggested that ticket prices include a facility fee. Although this fee will be minimal, it will aid in producing some amount of revenue to be used to pay for the stadium. In the event of a cancelation of the 2021 season due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the facility fee should be increased the following year to make up for the loss. Facility fees should also be included in season ticket pricing and booster club membership pricing as well. Seeing as Polar Park offers four different booster club membership options, including a Teammate Membership (free), a Lead Off Hitter Membership (\$100), an All-Star Membership (\$250), and a Hall of Fame Membership (\$500), they bring in a great source of revenue and can include a facility fee in the price of the membership fee (Polar Park, 2020).

Final Remarks

It is essential for Worcester to complete construction of Polar Park and prepare for a 2021 season, otherwise the season will have to be played on the road. If the 'WooSox' were to return to Pawtucket for a season, there would be minimal financial gain and extensive loss of Worcester community support and stadium use. The \$99.5 million project will continue to pay for itself, under the supervision of city officials, and will play a pivotal role in the Worcester community.

As COVID-19 continues to have a devastating impact on the world of sports, Polar Park and Worcester need to consider pathways to prosperity. Making the community aware of the payment plan for the stadium, gaining community buy-in, and partnering with local businesses is essential to economic success. Additionally, collaborating with surrounding colleges and universities, offering viable transportation, and creating an eco-friendly health initiative will allow Polar Park to pay for itself and create a thriving community.

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