

COMMENTARY

Pick-up baseball



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Ray Judah, the Lee County commissioner with about 20 years in the saddle of public office, has stepped up to the plate.

They aren't mixed metaphors, by the way; you can ride to a baseball diamond on horseback and then play ball. I've seen it done in the literal (not here), and now Mr. Judah is doing it in the figurative (right here).

Mr. Judah is one of my favorite local politicians, and in my experience, he looks out not only for people here and now, but for those then and someday. People like your kids and mine, who might like to see the birds and the turkeys when they grow up, along with the panthers and the bees somewhere outside of a natural history museum.

A long time ago, Mr. Judah earned the pejorative tag, "Environmentalist." At the same time, he earned a badge of honor: "Environmentalist." Once he was Democrat, back when he was young. Now he's hardened, a realist, a Republican. He got old.

He and my wife get along. He knows one of my younger boys pretty well.

All of that history means that sometimes, Mr. Judah is right.

Lately, he's championed the Boston Red Sox, who don't like the downtown

Fort Myers stadium where they currently train in the spring. I'm not certain why they don't, but they don't. Something about more hotels and restaurants located closer to the field.

Also, they want a stadium that looks like the one they come from up in Bean Town, with a green wall, and I don't know what else (but picky picky, they didn't want it in City of Palms Park, downtown). A few months ago, they threatened to leave and take their show on the road, to Sarasota or somewhere else, if they didn't get what they wanted.

Maybe they'll want Lee County to supply them with some drunk denizens of Boston, too, who can be shipped in for those 18 spring games at home that begin Feb. 25. That would create the same soundtrack the rich boys hear when the season starts for real, making them even more comfortable while they warm their cold muscles on the green-as-big-bills spring diamond we built for them.

I don't doubt the Beaners would be delighted to help, especially if Lee County taxpayers supply the beer and hot dogs on top of the traveling bill.

Here's the problem, though, for me. Mr. Judah and some others — a bunch of decent, aging white guys who work for Lee County and played a little ball in their youth (Mr. Hammond, Mr. Yarborough, others) — will bend over backwards to spend a huge amount of money, thoughtfully provided by the citizens of Lee County, to please the Boston Red Sox.

They are now willing to cough up \$80

million or so of our tax dollars — a figure thrown around like a hand grenade with the pin in, as if it can't hurt anybody — on a new stadium complex out east of town somewhere.

That's old news, sort of. More recently, Mr. Judah and Co. have been courting the Baltimore Orioles as a replacement team for spring training in the City of Palms Park, which is a good way to get the deal with the Red Sox run through local government by politicians who could get voted out of office when taxpayers realize how much money they've been taken for.

God knows when the Sox leave we need the Orioles, or somebody, downtown. And why? Well, yes, first because we can still walk over to games from the French Connection, my favorite eatery down on Jackson and First Streets.

But also there's this little problem: The city and county — that's not only you and me but your children and mine — still owe many millions on the downtown stadium. With principal and interest and the million-dollar annual upkeep required, our debt on City of Palms Park is roughly \$26 million. Or is that \$40 million, when you take into account everything?

Something like that, but you and I don't care. We don't keep the books, we just pay them down.

And just a couple of weeks ago, Mr. Judah came back from Minneapolis, where he was talking to the Minnesota Twins, he said — trying to keep them happy.

All this means that we have become addicts, not of baseball, not even of money, but of money projections.

Mr. Judah and many others claim that

the Red Sox alone can bring \$25 million to \$60 million per four-week spring season into "the community."

Well, excuse me, you might say, but the community — not only ours but the American community — is now locked in a deepening recession so bad that it brought the president of the United States to town this week.

That's one.

Two, if you read the story on the front page of this paper, you know we could take the \$80 million, cut it roughly in half, and buy the Lee Memorial Health System a new integrated computer network that would allow every doctor or nurse in every big hospital or small office or testing center instant access to patient records, killing redundancy and probably saving millions right off the bat, while making a lot of people feel better faster.

And we'd still have \$30 or \$40 million left over, along with lower health-care costs.

Or we could do something extraordinary for our school children, like start a scholarship fund for every kid in Lee County whose parents don't have a house anymore, or whose parents go it alone as singles, or whose parents don't have health insurance, or make less than \$50,000 a year.

And if we wanted to see a baseball game in the spring, we could drive to Sarasota.

Or — and this is radical — we could meet in the park with a few bats and balls, and some gloves, and do a pick-up game.

Maybe Ray Judah would come, and bring his good will and some chicken or something. ■

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