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Traditional stadium foes muted on UMd. proposal

■ Maryland wants a \$100 million replacement for Cole Field House.

By Sean Scully
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

It's funny how quickly stadiums can go from a "waste of taxpayer money" to a "good thing."

Two years ago, Maryland legislators blew a collective gasket over Gov. Parris N. Glendening's plan to spend \$200 million on a new football stadium in Baltimore, not to mention an additional \$73 million on roads to the new Redskins stadium in Landover.

Ten years ago, some legislators balked at the \$210 million plan to build the Camden Yards sports complex, home of the Oriole Park baseball stadium.

This year, the response is much more muted to a \$100 million plan to replace the aging Cole Field House at the University of Maryland in College Park — even though the state is still handing over \$20 million per year to pay off the Baltimore football and baseball stadiums. The baseball debt runs through 2019, the football debt through 2026.

"I do think this is a different thing than our previous encounters with athletic facilities," House Majority Leader John Hurson, Montgomery County Democrat and a 1996 stadium opponent, said, picking his words judiciously.

"It's going to be a lot easier for me to vote for Cole Field House, spend the money for the college, than to vote for a professional sports stadium," said Delegate

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HISTORY OF STADIUM DEALS

1986: The General Assembly approves plans for the 85-acre Camden Yards site, which would be home to a new baseball stadium and a new football stadium. Cost: \$100 million.

1986: The General Assembly approves plans for Oriole Park, the baseball stadium portion of Camden Yards. Cost: \$110 million.

1996: The General Assembly approves plans for the new Ravens stadium, as yet unnamed, as the football portion of Camden Yards. Cost: \$200 million.

■ All three deals are paid for out of lottery proceeds, so they don't come directly out of the pockets of all Maryland taxpayers.

■ The Oriole Park and Camden Yards deals together are paid for with \$55 million in lottery cash and \$155 million in lottery-backed bonds. The state pays about \$13.6 million per year on those bonds through 2019.

■ The Ravens stadium is paid for with \$100 million in lottery cash and \$100 million in bonds. The state pays \$6.4 million a year on those bonds through 2026.

■ The size and structure of any Cole Field House deal has not been set. It could, if the legislature directs, be funded through the Maryland Stadium Authority, which handled both the baseball and football deals.

Source: Edward Cline, deputy director of the Maryland Stadium Authority

STADIUM

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Bruce Poole, Washington County Democrat, who led a spirited last-minute effort to kill the stadium plans at the end of the 1996 session.

University officials say the 41-year-old field house is hopelessly obsolete and is not worth renovat-

ing. Not only is it old, it is not air-conditioned, lacks facilities for the disabled and needs a new roof. They propose building a new 17,000-seat arena on another site, replacing the old 14,500-seat field house.

Cole Field House is the home of the Terrapins basketball team. It also hosts concerts, speeches and the annual graduation ceremony.

Mr. Glendening, himself a long-time professor at the university, re-

fused to comment directly on any similarity between the 1996 stadium deals and Cole Field House.

Instead, he used a rolled-up piece of paper to swat the reporter who raised the question.

"Don't you support your university," he said swatting furiously, then he drew himself up imperiously. "I support my university."

But might not the public get tired of funding sports arenas?

"I support my university," he repeated firmly.

University President William E. Kirwan told legislators last week that the replacement would cost about \$106 million, according to a preliminary estimate, but the university could only raise about \$45 million. That leaves the state government holding the remaining \$61 million bill.

Even supporters of the university say that figure is too high for legislators to swallow.

But unlike the bruising 1996 stadium wars, the debate this year

seems to be a question of "how much" and not "if" the state will pay.

"I think you'll hear a lot about the amount," Delegate Rushern Baker III, Prince George's County Democrat and anti-stadium crusader, said. "There are a lot of other schools that could use that money for other things."

And, yet, even Mr. Baker agrees that the university will probably get what it wants, even if the state picks up less than \$61 million.

"In the end, people are very proud of the University of Maryland; it has a huge contingent of people in the legislature . . . and it has a good program in sports," he said.

But not everybody dismisses the comparison between the 1996 stadiums and the Cole Field House replacement.

"We ought to rename Maryland the Stadium State," huffed House Minority Leader Robert Kittleman, Howard County Republican.

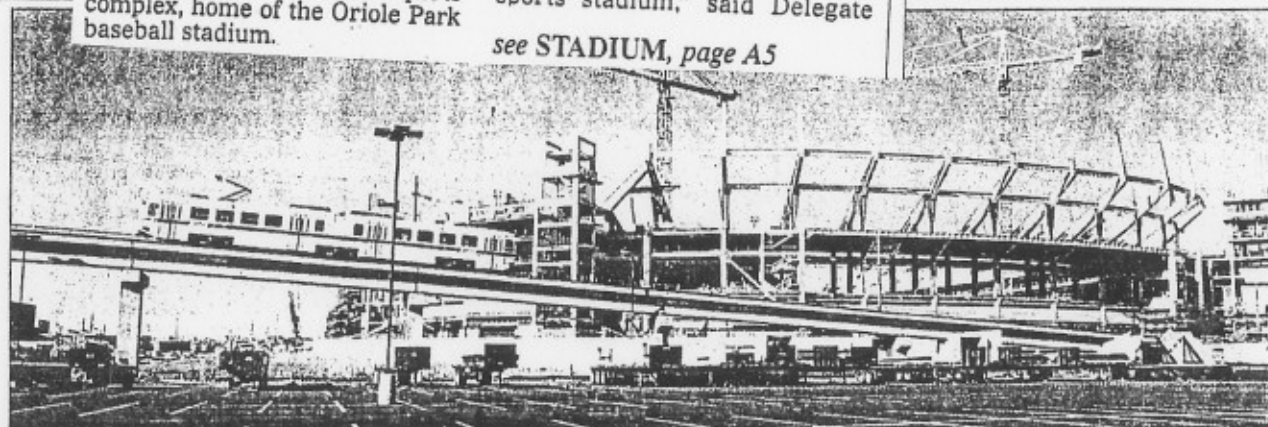


Photo by J.A. Edrins Jr./The Washington Times

A Light Rail car passes the NFL stadium being built in Baltimore near Oriole Park at Camden Yards, which the state will be paying for through 2026.