

Ballpark Giveaways Go 0 for 2

BY NEIL DEMAUSE

Voters in Pittsburgh and Minneapolis delivered two quick strikes to sports team owners on Election Day, overwhelmingly rejecting plans to provide public money for new major-league stadiums.

In the Pittsburgh-area referendum, residents of 11 counties voted nearly 2 to 1 to reject a half-point sales tax increase. The bulk of the money raised would have gone to fund new football and baseball stadiums for the Pirates and Steelers. Minneapolis voters, meanwhile, approved by a resounding 70 percent a \$10 million cap on city ballpark spending, which is revocable only by public referendum (see "Minneapolis Voters Step Up To Bat," November 2). That vote, coupled with the Minnesota state legislature's rejection of a stadium bill the following week, derailed billionaire Carl Pohlad's plans for a new publicly funded Twins ballpark. The Twins owner has said he will move the team to North Carolina if no stadium deal is in place by November 30.

The two defeats put an end to a remarkable winning streak for team owners. Over the past two years, ten cities have voted on whether to fund sports facilities with public money; all but one (a proposed hockey arena in Columbus, Ohio) passed. In most of these cities, initial polls showed voter opposition, but multimillion-dollar media campaigns helped the teams pull victories from the jaws of defeat. In Minneapolis, however, Minnesota Wins!, the Twins-funded pro-stadium group, outspent stadium opponents \$3 million to \$15,000 and still lost. Minnesota lawmakers fielded more than 150,000 phone calls the day before the vote in the state legislature, with sentiment running 3 to 2 against the project.

Public opposition, however, is no guarantee that the days of easy money for sports franchise owners are over. In 1995, for example, Seattle-area voters narrowly defeated a stadium-funding

referendum for the Mariners, only to have the state legislature turn around and approve the \$320 million project anyway. Owners and legislators in both Pittsburgh and Minneapolis are still seeking a way around public disapproval. Recently re-elected Minneapolis Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton has offered to circumvent the \$10 million cap on city spending by hiding stadium infrastructure improvements in other budget items.

Still, public opposition against stadium deals could help level the playing

field in the stadium game. With stadium referenda already scheduled in North Carolina and Colorado next year, and sports funding battles heating up in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and San Diego, 1998 should provide a test of whether rising popular discontent can finally unseat the champions of sports welfare. ■

Neil deMause is co-author of *Field of Schemes: How the Great Stadium Swindle Turns Public Money into Private Profit*.

left politics

Populist Democracy

BY JOEL BLEIFUSS

In August 1995, Ronnie Dugger, founding editor and publisher of *The Texas Observer*, published a call-to-arms in *The Nation* entitled, "Real Populists Please Stand Up." After thousands of letters in support, the Alliance for Democracy was born.

Two years later, the Lincoln, Mass.-based Alliance has 55 chapters, a membership of 1,800 and its own political journal, *Deep Democracy*. Seventy members of the Alliance gathered in Atchison, Kan., on October 30 to formulate the group's constitution, set organizational goals and establish a series of "national action campaigns"—all of which will be ratified by the membership via mail-in ballots.

The convention delegates proposed an eight-point agenda. Five of the items focus on corporate power, including campaigns to amend the Constitution to strip corporations of their rights as "persons" and to stop the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, a proposed treaty that would remove barriers to international investment. They also set a goal of 20,000 members by 2000, endorsed public financing of elections, and supported a single-payer national healthcare program.

Dugger sees little need for party politics at the moment. The left has a choice, he says. It can follow the leadership of the Democratic Party or build a new mass movement. "In my opinion, the Democratic Party has stopped being worth following," he says. "The Alliance isn't that mass movement. But I see the Alliance as helping to precipitate that movement. Once that movement coheres, the choice will need to be made whether to recover the Democratic Party or start a new national party." ■

Taking Out the Trash

BY JUAN GONZALEZ

The men filter out through the gates of the plant along grimy Varick Avenue in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn as a constant line of trucks hurtles past them on their way to deposit yet more garbage inside.

Since early 1996, the sprawling plant—a combination transfer station and recycling facility—has been operated by Waste Management Inc., a subsidiary of Illinois-based WMX Technologies Inc., the world's largest trash hauler.

One evening in late October, Luis Rodríguez, a welder at another of Waste Management's numerous sites in New York City, stands outside the plant and greets the men from the early shift as they leave work.

"We're dying in this place," says Rodríguez, showing me a scarred right hand that was burned during an on-the-job accident a year ago. A former oil pipeline worker from Colombia, Rodríguez has been chosen by his co-workers as their spokesman.

Three of the 400 workers at the Varick Avenue plant were killed in separate accidents last year. On March 22, 1996, a wheel-loader operator fatally crushed a co-worker when he accidentally pushed a steel refuse container onto him and pinned him to a wall. On June 12, according to a federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) report, a laborer "was sweeping between the rear of a highway truck and a loading dock when the truck suddenly backed to the dock and crushed the employee." On August 21, according to another report, the driver of a garbage truck who was waiting in line to unload his cargo at the tipping floor got out of his vehicle and was "immediately struck and knocked to the ground by a passing container truck" and then run over by a second truck.

OSHA inspectors found serious safety violations in each incident, fining the company an average of \$8,000 per death. Since taking over the facility, Waste Management has been slapped with nearly \$100,000 in OSHA fines for more than 40 safety violations.

Varick workers complain that supervisors force assembly-line sorters, all of whom are South American immigrants making minimum wage, to work without proper breathing equipment or safety training. Some foremen, the workers claim, fire and even assault those who object to the mistreatment. The foremen, they say, know that many of them are in the country

illegally and won't complain. Then the company often covers up the serious injuries that result from its lax safety standards.

"We did inherit a number of potential hazards when we purchased these plants," says Waste Management spokeswoman Susan Clark. But she insists that the company has spent millions to upgrade safety conditions since the three deaths last year, and she discounts any stories of worker abuse. OSHA records suggest otherwise. The company has piled up more than \$39,000 in new fines in New York in the last six months.

OSHA has also fined Waste Management subsidiaries in California nearly \$800,000 since January 1996 for scores of serious safety violations at several of its facilities.

This would be an appalling safety record for even a Third World sweatshop, but WMX Technologies is a publicly traded company with revenues of \$10 billion in 1994.

Waste Management gained a foothold in the New York City area after a much ballyhooed effort by local prosecutors and politicians, including Mayor Rudy Giuliani, to lower prices and end organized crime's stranglehold on the region's waste-hauling business. In July, the company won an \$80 million city contract to haul all household trash from the Bronx to a landfill in Virginia.

City officials who granted Waste Management its contract never bothered to investigate the firm's horrible safety record.

"Rumors," said one official I interviewed in October about the three deaths last year. "This is New York, you would have heard about that," sanitation department spokesman Lucian Chalfen says.

Waste Management is a darling of the politicians and Wall Street financiers even though the firm has a rap sheet nearly as long as the mobsters it replaced. Since 1980, the company has faced repeated federal and local criminal indictments for price fixing and bribery. Convictions of Waste Management subsidiaries and executives have occurred in Georgia, Florida, Ohio, Illinois and California. During the same period, the firm has paid more than \$52 million in fines and settlements of lawsuits arising from its environmental practices, a record that Greenpeace has called the worst in the business.

On Varick Avenue in Brooklyn, a corporate giant replaces the mob, and the number of dead and maimed workers multiplies. The feds slap the giant's wrists while the city rewards it with millions—and the price of trash removal drops. ■

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