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## Vacancy at One Bills Drive

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Paint blisters and flakes from Ralph Wilson Stadium's once-gleaming large white sign, the one that faces Jim Kelly Boulevard, a road less traveled than it used to be.

The pockmarked facade proudly announces this is the "Home of the Buffalo Bills," but that's a cruel reminder of what no longer is.

Caravans of cars and recreational vehicles with red, white and blue flags rippling in the wind don't turn into the parking lots anymore, not since the Bills left town. There's no reason to tailgate. If you search around the rusted guardrails, you might find some returnable five-cent fossils to prove there had been parties here.

What really passes for action is the occasional security patrol to thwart the graffiti artists and souvenir-savengers, prowling for a chunk of concrete. Weeds sprout through the fracturing asphalt.

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Today marks two weeks since the National Football League wrapped up its season. Locally, fans still are going through withdrawal despite the Buffalo Bills' failure to reach the playoffs for the 12th straight season, the league's longest drought. The next meaningful game won't take place for another seven months.

Imagine if there wasn't a next game.

Imagine the Bills are gone. When or why they left doesn't matter, not for this thought experiment.

"We really are the identity of this community on a national scale, an international scale," Bills CEO Russ Brandon said. "People know of Buffalo because of the Bills and the National Football League. We're the fabric of this community in a lot of ways."

Some highly placed political leaders and business experts are convinced the Bills never will leave the region because locally connected, sports-minded billionaires Bob Rich, Jeremy Jacobs, B. Thomas Golisano and Terry Pegula wouldn't let that fabric get ripped away.

Also significant is that NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has Jamestown roots that could compel him to preserve the Bills.

Yet there are no guarantees. Cleveland Browns fans never dreamed their oaken franchise could uproot. But the Browns moved to Baltimore in 1996.

Other observers with intimate knowledge of Western New York's economy fear what's looming. Bills owner Ralph C. Wilson Jr. is 93 years old. Mystery surrounds the future of a hotly coveted business asset. The NFL will need teams in Los Angeles.

At the very least, stopping to consider life without the Bills should help us appreciate what they mean to the community. The scenario also weighs the merits of designing a doomsday plan -- just in case.

"I don't think there is a plan in place," former Erie County Executive Joel Giambra said. "But at some point this community's going to have to come to grips with the possibility of not having the Buffalo Bills here."

What would happen if the Bills were to go away?

How exactly would it hurt?

Would the region be prepared?

"Having people imagine it and what they would do without the team is a good thing," said Indiana University social psychologist Dr. Edward Hirt. "People need to anticipate that, and the more we do that the more prepared we are when it happens."

Experts forecast Western New York wouldn't endure much economic pain. Not even the Orchard Park or Hamburg real-estate markets would miss a few dozen millionaires. Annual alcohol sales would be affected maybe only a percentage point or two without Bills-related parties and tailgates, Try-It Distributing chairman Gene Vukelic guessed.

Some national studies, in fact, suggest the local economy would improve without the Bills, though not all analysts concur.

But everyone agrees that Western New York's biggest struggle would be emotional. And a prolonged, defeatist funk could infiltrate the region's business dealings.

"It would be devastating," said Pete Augustine, president of New Era Cap. "Buffalo is in a group of Rust Belt cities that haven't been able to understand really how they fit into the new world economy.

"There's a pride that exists in Buffalo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Detroit, but after so many generations of knowing how to create products, we don't anymore. People look at Buffalo through the lens of what it was and not what it is. Losing the Bills would only reinforce that mentality."

If the Bills were to leave, it would be difficult to imagine another team coming along. Aside from Los Angeles, which is expected to have pro football again, the last market to lose its only NFL team and not get a replacement was Portsmouth, Ohio, in 1934.

"It's going to hurt your community because it will make you feel 'less than,'" said Dr. Steven Danish, a sports psychologist from Virginia Commonwealth University. "It leads people to wonder 'Are we going to disappear?' No, it doesn't mean that, but there are people who start to feel like 'This is the end of our town!'"

That, of course, wouldn't be the case.

### **A decomposing dinosaur?**

Western New Yorkers would slog onward, even as The Ralph's concrete walls crumbled and constantly reminded us of a lost connection to the biggest weekly stage in sports.

"This city's had the crap kicked out of it many times," Buffalo native and founding Goo Goo Dolls bassist Robby Takac said. "Every time, it's come back swinging.

"I don't think it would be the end of days or anything like that, but it would be really unfortunate to lose something that's so loved here."

Motorists would pass by Ralph Wilson Stadium and see a decomposing dinosaur. Some Bills fans would avert their eyes or get wistful for the days when outsiders made fun of them for losing four straight Super Bowls.

"A lot of an outsider's view of this city is based on those four Super Bowls," Takac said. "Seeing that economic mechanism go away completely would be another shot in the gut."

The county took 13 years to demolish Memorial Auditorium after it closed. That building was smaller and sat atop more desirable property than Ralph Wilson Stadium. There would be no rush to develop the Orchard Park site. Erie County probably wouldn't have extra funds lying around to raze it and fill the gulch right away.

"Absolutely, I'd like to do the job because of the historical connotations to it, but it's a sad day because the Bills would be gone," said Pete Hartung, project manager for Ontario Specialty Contracting, a demolition company located along the Buffalo River.

Ontario Specialty Contracting tore down the RCA Dome in Indianapolis and Texas Stadium, the Dallas Cowboys' former home, after new stadiums were built.

Hartung estimated it would cost Erie County between \$5 million and \$7.5 million -- including salvage value -- to take down The Ralph and return it to shovel-ready condition for the next developer.

There are no apples-to-apples comparisons to forecast Buffalo's post-Bills atmospheric conditions.

Cleveland found out rather quickly after the Browns left that it would be getting another team -- and a sparkling new stadium to boot. After the Baltimore Colts loaded up their moving trucks in 1984 and darted to Indianapolis, Baltimore still had Major League Baseball, with NFL, National Basketball Association and National Hockey League teams an hour away in Washington, D.C.

The closest situation might be Winnipeg, which had its sporting heart cleaved from its chest when the NHL's Jets became the Phoenix Coyotes in 1996. The NHL means as much to a small-market Canadian town as the NFL does here.

Winnipeg got another team when the Atlanta Thrashers relocated last year. But for 15 winters folks in Winnipeg had little reason to believe the NHL would come back.

"In terms of community pride, there was just kind of a malaise," said Tim Campbell, the Jets' beat reporter for the Winnipeg Free Press. "We didn't experience people jumping off bridges, but there was a real letdown, a fan depression."

But Campbell added none of the most polarizing predictions came true. Winnipeg didn't wither without hockey, nor did the team's departure free funds to save public institutions. Schools and hospitals still closed amid tough times.

### **A light hit**

Analysts predict Western New York's economy could absorb a Bills departure with little trouble.

The region has other interests. Even when the Bills were on their torrid 5-2 start last fall, roughly three out of every five TV homes in Western New York didn't have the game on.

Based on 2010 U.S. Department of Commerce statistics, the gross domestic product of the Buffalo-Niagara market was \$45.15 billion. Remove the Bills from that total, and "it doesn't leave a ripple," said Bruce Fisher, former Erie County deputy executive and founding director of the Center for Economic and Policy Studies at Buffalo State.

In trying to learn exactly what the Bills mean to the economy, The Buffalo News discovered local government agencies don't have 21st century figures that provide definitive insight.

The latest study the Erie County executive's office keeps on hand relies on data from 1996, when Jim Kelly quarterbacked his final season. The study was conducted by the Greater Buffalo Partnership Bills Task Force to help the Erie County Legislature prepare for Rich Stadium lease negotiations.

The NFL as a business enterprise barely resembles 16 years ago. Broadcast revenues have skyrocketed. The league has become a merchandising juggernaut, and financial growth is most readily reflected in player salaries. In 1996, Kelly made \$3.715 million, while Dallas Cowboys quarterback Troy Aikman was the highest-paid player at \$5.371 million.

Last year's Bills roster included 15 players with contracts averaging \$3 million a season. Quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick signed a six-year, \$59 million contract extension.

In the Town of Orchard Park, the most directly impacted community, neither the town nor the chamber of commerce maintains Bills economic impact data.

"All we know for a fact is people are spending money here," said Orchard Park Chamber of Commerce executive director Nancy Conley. "A lot of those businesses on Southwestern Boulevard bring in a great deal of income on game days during the season. So do those people who park cars on their lawns. Tops and Wegmans are insane on Sunday mornings."

### **A 'feel-good' expense**

Overall, Fisher doesn't see a substantial economic benefit from the Bills. He noted the county gives the Bills about \$8 million a year in subsidies that could be spent elsewhere for a greater economic return.

In a 2004 research paper published by the Cato Institute, economics professors Dennis Coates from the University of Maryland Baltimore County and Brad R. Humphreys from the University of Alberta wrote "nearly all academic economists studying this issue [conclude] that professional sports generally have little, if any, positive effect on a city's economy."

Coates and Humphreys' research claimed professional sports had a "statistically significant negative impact on the retail and services sectors of the local economy," tending to raise wages for workers in the hotel industry but to lower wages for restaurant and bars.

"When we're trying to sell Buffalo to the rest of the world, the Bills are a vital part of the community," Augustine said. "It's not about how many pizzas get sold on game days."

Fisher conceded a team doesn't have to make a region profitable to be worthwhile. It's OK for a community to fund an item that simply makes it feel good.

"You buy this kind of thing for the community for the psychological benefit," Fisher said. "But don't delude yourself. It's a cost, not a benefit in economic terms. It's an expense."

Without the Bills, locals would spend a healthy chunk of that money on other diversions like shopping, dining or nightlife. Fisher said when dollars are spent at local businesses, the economic benefit is exponential. For example, money spent on pizza and wings at La Nova has twice as much impact on the local economy as buying dinner at Olive Garden, with its corporate office in Orlando.

"When you spend money on mercenaries, the money leaves with them," Fisher said.

Then he tacked on another pointed comparison.

Rick's Cabaret International "imported a planeload of 100 exotic dancers into Indianapolis for the Super Bowl," Fisher said, referring to media reports. "They're not from Indianapolis. They're going to take the money and go home.

"That's what a pro football team is. I'm sorry, but it's the same thing."

### **Just passing through**

Bills General Manager Buddy Nix affirmed last month the team would spend up to the NFL's \$120 million salary cap, introducing a few dozen millionaires into Western New York who wouldn't normally be here.

Giambra noted that works out better for the state than the county. Albany would rake in between \$9 million and \$10 million in income taxes.

"How much money is really put back into the community from 30 millionaires?" Giambra asked. "The answer is more to the state than to the local community. Maybe they buy a house and a couple cars here, but most of that money leaves with them."

Or maybe football players don't buy those big-ticket items here.

Many players bring cars with them to training camp. Luxury vehicles in the St. John Fisher parking lots are dotted with out-of-state license plates.

Real-estate agents The News interviewed dismissed the idea that losing so many millionaires would undercut the housing market in Orchard Park or Hamburg.

NFL coaches and players not only tend to rent here, but they're also known for trying to break their leases when the season is over.

Terrell Owens was given a key to the city, but he rented. Ralph Wilson doesn't own a house in Western New York; he has a condo in Williamsville. Head coach Chan Gailey rents.

"Not one Realtor would be impacted by the Bills not being here," said Maureen Flavin, an agent who specializes in high-end properties and has represented several Buffalo Sabres and Bills clients over the past 20 years.

"So many of them rent, and the places they rent are highly desirable. I could rent those places out in my sleep. There are way more people who want to rent than places to rent."

While one could argue most dollars once earmarked for the Bills still would get circulated through Western New York, charitable organizations inevitably would get dented.

Since 2001, Wilson has donated an average of \$2.5 million a year to charities (a majority of which are local) and another \$1.8 million a year to Western New York youth football programs. Those figures don't include charitable gifts from the team's community relations department, which provides signed memorabilia and other items for fundraisers.

The Buffalo Bills Youth Foundation has donated \$3 million, much of it to Buffalo Public Schools, since it was founded in 1986.

Wilson gave \$1 million to the University at Buffalo's department of orthopedics and sports medicine in September. Many Bills players also have charitable foundations that help local causes. Last year, 40 charity, youth and church organizations worked concession stands during games and raised \$344,000 in pay for their causes.

## **A team of our own**

But the team's most significant value remains unquantifiable.

The Bills help us feel like big-timers. There are only 32 NFL markets. Cities across the country -- around the world -- would love to be in that exclusive club.

"The weather might be bad, but we have an NFL team," said Danish, the Virginia Commonwealth sports psychologist. "What do you have? You can talk about the weather. But, hell, I got the Bills."

And if Western New York lost them?

"Psychologically it will hurt," said Giambra, who signed the lease amendment that allowed the Bills to play regular-season games in Toronto. "There's still so many people that think we're a Podunk-, Hooterville-type community. That will probably get reinforced in the minds of people who look down upon this community, that 'You couldn't even keep your football team.'"

Without the Bills, other sports could be strengthened as fans find new loyalties or rediscover them. Although the Sabres have a robust season-ticket base, being the only major league team in town would help if they were to experience continued struggles. College sports might reinforce allegiances.

Danish and Hirt, the Indiana University social psychologist, emphasized that fans with diverse interests would be able to cope -- not only mentally, but also physically.

"When people have an important facet of their identity taken away, it does have psychological outcomes," Hirt said. "People get depressed. People feel empty and it sends them searching for what's going to occupy that void in my identity and my investment in time and energies."

People must be able to identify themselves as more than just Bills fans, and the more identifiers -- family, career, religion, community groups, hobbies -- the better.

"The people in your community are going to feel they've lost something important to them," Danish said. "It'll take a couple years for people to get over that. But they won't be going to mental hospitals or taking drugs for it."

In Winnipeg, Campbell said the melancholy lasted three years.

But then the weather-beaten, downtrodden city started to embrace its new reality. Major events passed through such as the 1999 summer Pan American Games, the 1999 World Junior Hockey Championships and the 2003 World Curling Championships. Winnipeg was OK with that.

"Everyone said we needed the Jets, they're our identity, our lifeblood," Campbell said. "The Jets made us feel worthy and feel like a major city.

"You know, Winnipeg did pretty well in the 15 years the Jets were gone. Once you realize life's going to go on and a hockey league or football league isn't going to validate our existence, we were OK with the fact we were a nice place to live. We just learned to get over it."

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*Correction: A previous version of the story indicated that Bills owner Ralph Wilson does not own a home in Western New York. He does not own a house in Western New York, but has a condo in Williamsville.*  
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