

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Conor Friedersdorf: If NFL team is a must, use private funds

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Autumn is the cruelest season for transplants to Southern California, who recall childhood deer hunts and leaves changing colors, only to realize that every September here is an Indian Summer. The air is rarely crisp. The apple cider is third rate. If football is the sport of autumn, perhaps it's fitting that every NFL franchise to play in L.A. or Orange County has fled.

That's fine by me.

Like many in my age cohort, I cheered for Magic Johnson, Wayne Gretzky and Reggie Jackson as a kid. Who were the stars on the Rams and Raiders back then? I couldn't tell you, even though I remember Joe Montana and John Elway. Pac-12 football has always been more than sufficient to keep me entertained until the [Lakers](#) start playing in November, and as best I can tell, a desire for pro football is not a priority of the region's residents. But it has been a priority for various politicians, including current Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti.

If entrepreneurs want to bet that an NFL team would turn a profit here in the nation's second largest media market, I wish them luck, and hope that no bureaucrat stands in their way. But with NBC News raising the possibility that both the Rams and Raiders could conceivably return to Southern California as soon as 2015, the time is ripe to remind political leaders – especially the ones in Los Angeles and Anaheim – that any deal should be privately financed.

In fact, I'd go so far as to say that any elected official who approves a deal to build an NFL stadium with public money, or even to finance it with subsidized bonds, should be immediately recalled. NFL owners are billionaires. They intend to profit tremendously from their investments. It is hard to imagine a more flagrant misappropriation of taxpayer funds than increasing their profit margin in a highly desirable media market, especially because the alleged public benefits of sports stadiums and franchises are all but illusory.

Dennis Coates and Brad R. Humphreys studied 37 cities that had one or more professional sports franchises over a period of almost three decades. "In stark contrast to the results claimed by most prospective economic impact studies commissioned by teams or stadium advocates, the consensus in the academic literature has been that the overall sports environment has no measurable effect on the level of real income in metropolitan areas," they wrote in a report

published by the Cato Institute. “Our own research suggests that professional sports may be a drain on local economies rather than an engine of economic growth.”

Stadiums are a particularly bad investment.

This is partly because taxpayer dollars spent on stadiums could’ve been spent on some other piece of infrastructure. Every publicly funded arena should come with a nearby freeway billboard with the faces of all politicians who voted for it and some variation on this message: “In traffic? The money spent on this NFL stadium could’ve improved your daily commute.”

In another argument against public financing, Nick Traverse points to data gathered by the firm Conventions, Sports & Leisure International. “Since 1997,” he writes, “nearly \$5 billion of public money has been spent on the construction or renovation of 19 NFL stadiums.” What would you do with \$5 billion in taxpayer money? I presume you would not steer it to a professional sports league that takes in almost \$10 billion per year in revenue.

I wish any privately financed NFL franchise success. But neither Orange County nor Los Angeles needs such a franchise. Even without the NFL, we’ve got more professional sports teams in our backyards than most cities on the planet. The San Diego Chargers aren’t so far away. And for those craving autumn, our pumpkin patches sprout up well before Halloween. Eventually, there will even be crisp days and leaves on some trees changing colors.

Of course, we call that winter here.