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Ron DeSantis is Right About Sports Teams and Taxpayer Money

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Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis didn't have to mention the Tampa Bay Rays' most recent foray into politics when his veto of a spending bill spiked the Major League Baseball franchise's effort to get the state to pay for a new spring training complex.

The team and its local allies tried to sell this classic example of crony capitalism as a way to pay for a youth sports facility whose real purpose would be to gift the Rays a new operations center. But DeSantis rightly took the position that if the team wants a new place for its players to train, the team should pay for it itself.

DeSantis decided to remain on offense against woke businesses by also pointing out during his announcement of the veto that if the Rays—who had only days earlier voiced their support for more restrictions on gun rights—were seeking to reach into Florida taxpayers' wallets, they ought to stay out of politics. Predictably, that provoked the liberal press to denounce the man who many Democrats now hate almost as much as former President Donald Trump himself.

As with DeSantis' battle with The Walt Disney Company over its opposition to a Florida law that banned gender indoctrination in grades K-3 in public schools (mislabeled by the Left as the "don't say gay" bill), the governor isn't playing by the old rules in which elected Republican officials refrained from hitting back against opponents in the business community that advocated for, and fund, causes and programs that undermine conservative values.

For DeSantis' liberal critics, that isn't playing fair. Democrats traditionally opposed treating corporations as having First Amendment rights—as in the 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court case—because they assumed they only backed Republicans. But now that Democrats are the party of Wall Street and the corporate world has largely gone woke, Democrats think it isn't right for the GOP to not only criticize, but to refuse to use taxpayer dollars to subsidize companies that oppose what they advocate for.

With only $35 million at stake, the Rays' gambit was a minor league affair when compared to the sweetheart deal Disney benefited from. Still, if private businesses are going to extend their hands to the state, it is hardly unreasonable to ask them to stop acting as political advocacy groups while doing so.

The jury is still out as to whether the price that Disney paid for campaigning against a key DeSantis issue will influence other companies that want government benefits to butt out of political controversies. The Rays' decision to double down on their activist bent illustrates that the temptation to fly the leftist flag on the hot topic of the day may prove for many to be too irresistible to resist.

Indeed, just as the Rays lost state funding for a training complex, the team embroiled itself in another political battle because of its decision to celebrate Pride Month by affixing a rainbow patch onto their players' uniforms this past weekend (as did the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants). The problem was that four of the Rays' players opted not to wear the patch. Ironically, that opened up the team to criticism from woke sports pages, such as that of *The New York Times*, for allowing the dissenters, who cited their Christian beliefs, to play ball anyway.

Nevertheless, the principle behind the governor's refusal to go along with paying for the Rays' training complex is a rare example of a politician saying "no" to wealthy sports teams owners who want the state to enable them to get richer with the public's money.
Over the course of the last few decades, cities and states throughout the nation have bowed to pressure from sports franchises to build them new stadiums and arenas. The most recent example was in New York, where former Gov. Andrew Cuomo's successor Gov. Kathy Hochul cut a deal with the National Football League's Buffalo Bills that will result in the Empire State, which is otherwise strapped for funds to provide normal public services, spending $850 million on a new stadium for the team. And that's not taking into account that New York has already spent a combined $95 million on renovations for the Bills' existing stadium in 2014 and 2018.

The outrageous nature of the Bills' new deal is compounded by the fact that Hochul's husband may personally benefit from the team's windfall. Corruption on that level ought to hurt Hochul's chances of winning a full term on her own this November, but Hochul, a Buffalo native, is hoping that grateful football fans in Western New York will vote for her.

Yet as in Tampa, where Rays owner Stuart Sternberg had no shame about having Florida foot the bill for a team facility, few are asking why Bills owner Terry Pegula couldn't pay for the stadium himself. Sternberg is "only" worth $800 million, while Pegula has a net worth of $7 billion. But team owners are always ready to threaten to take their teams to other cities or states that are more willing to entice them with new stadiums and other ancillary benefits. That's what happened to Oakland, a city that was too broke to compete with Las Vegas and wound up seeing its beloved Raiders NFL franchise pick up and move to Nevada.
Few politicians are brave enough to risk what happened in New York when MLB's Dodgers and Giants left for California in 1957, leaving a generation of resentful supporters—like Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT)—behind.
Teams and their supporters claim they bring economic benefits to localities that build them stadiums. Yet economists from neoliberal-left (Brookings Institution) to libertarian-right (Cato

Institute) have consistently debunked these claims, along with a growing consensus in mainstream media outlets that argues these stadiums simply aren't worth the price.

Even those of us who are sports fans have to admit that the money most fans spend attending games—both at the stadiums and in their surrounding neighborhoods—has been shown to be transferred from other leisure activities. There is also no net uptick in local employment, and most of those jobs that are created by ballparks tend to be part-time and low-income. As for tax revenue, studies have shown that even the most vaunted examples of new stadiums built with public money that are intended to anchor local neighborhood development—such as the Camden Yards ballpark and Baltimore's Inner Harbor—haven't earned enough to justify the infusion of taxpayer cash. Almost all, including the Baltimore Orioles' stadium, which continues to receive $15 million a year from Maryland 30 years after it was built, have failed to sustain themselves as self-financing ventures.

The only people who benefit from stadiums and team facilities built with public money are the team owners, who grow richer because their new buildings include features that make their already-profitable businesses even more flush with cash.

What DeSantis vetoed last week was another example of socialism for sports team owners. Other elected officials should follow his example. And if his comments discourage other companies from using their wealth and popularity to support policies that many—perhaps most—taxpayers oppose, then that's all to the better.