



Barnidge: Why did Oakland squander \$750,000 on stadium study?

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SHOPPERS tend to overextend themselves during the holidays. They get caught up in the Christmas spirit, spend more than they should and then suffer a case of the regrets when the bills arrive.

Perhaps that's what happened to the Oakland City Council. Maybe it was all that eggnog and mistletoe.

It is difficult to come up with any other explanation for last week's decision to spend \$750,000 on an environmental impact report for a baseball stadium near Jack London Square that no one is planning to build.

We seem to recall that Oakland is still trying to dig out from under a \$32 million budget shortfall for the fiscal year. In fact, it has been so desperate to find savings that it has furloughed employees, shortened library hours and laid off 80 police officers, dropping the force to about 80 percent of what it should be.

Given that backdrop, you might wonder why the council would shell out three-quarters of a million dollars to study the feasibility of a baseball stadium.

That's an excellent question.

Indulging a stadium pipe dream while basic services

suffer is like stopping for a manicure on the way to the Food Bank.

This hypothetical facility -- no one has said a word about actually building it -- apparently is intended to satisfy the A's appetite for new accommodations, which they desperately need. Trouble is, the A's already have site in mind: Anywhere But Oakland.

Club

officials have fallen all over themselves whispering sweet nothings to San Jose. Before that, they proposed marriage to Fremont, which was politely turned away. Fremont would have been the smallest speck on the Major League Baseball map, but at least it isn't Oakland.

Oakland has acquired a hard-earned reputation in baseball as a city to escape. That comes from finishing 29th in attendance among 30 major league teams in 2010. Only Cleveland fans did a better job of staying away from games.

So embarrassing have been the baseball crowds at the Oakland Coliseum that upper-deck seats have been closed to the public and covered with tarps since 2006. That makes the stadium look less empty, and it keeps passing airline pilots from being blinded by the reflected glare of 25,000 empty seats.+

Oakland is not a booming baseball town, not in this economy.

That judgment pertains not just to fans but to the number of well-heeled corporate sponsors willing to purchase luxury boxes. Owners care more about luxury boxes than they do their mothers.

But let's imagine the impossible: Fans are abundant and corporations are willing to ply the A's with

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money. The idea of a city dedicating resources to a new sports facility still makes no financial sense.

And please don't tell us about how sports teams boost the economy.

The Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank, debunked that notion in 2004, when it released the findings of Dennis Coates, professor of economics at the University of Maryland, and Brad Humphreys, professor of recreation, sports and tourism at the University of Illinois.

"Our conclusion, and that of nearly all academic economists studying this issue, is that professional sports generally have little, if any, positive effect on a city's economy," they wrote.

"The net economic impact of professional sports in Washington, D.C., and the 36 other cities that hosted professional sports teams over nearly 30 years was a reduction in real per capita income over the entire metropolitan area."

Wonder if the \$750,000 report will include that information.

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