

Sports Legends Museum Renovations
ZA00P Miscellaneous Grant Program
FY2016 Maryland Executive Budget

Written Testimony

The Babe Ruth Birthplace Foundation opened Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards to the public in May, 2005. The Foundation had invested \$1.7 million towards the renovation of the interior of the facility that houses Sports Legends Museum in preparation for that opening. In addition, during the first ten years of operating Sports Legends, the Foundation has made rent payments of \$1.8 million to the Maryland Stadium Authority. That brings the total funding dedicated by the Foundation to \$3.5 million over the past decade.

In 2003 the Department of Legislative Services, in approving the occupancy of Camden Station by Sports Legends Museum, noted that it would “at the very least result in the utilization of a significant state historic structure.” Realizing the continuing impact sports has on our community, and the unique heritage of Camden Station, the State and the Foundation, accordingly, have been heavily vested in the property.

Since its opening, Sports Legends Museum has faced a number of financial challenges, chief among them being declining Orioles attendance (from 2005-2011), heavy restrictions on parking and signage, and the delayed opening and under performance of the Hilton Hotel, located just north of Sports Legends. Accordingly, the Babe Ruth Birthplace Foundation has sought and continues to seek ways to solidify the situation by reducing staff by more than 50% and seeking and receiving rent reduction from the Stadium Authority. In 2012 MSA began escalating monthly rent payments (currently about \$240,000/year), thus placing the museum in further financial jeopardy.

The Foundation set about devising a long-term strategy to put Sports Legends Museum, and its other attraction, the Babe Ruth Birthplace and Museum, on solid financial footing. It received a \$480,000 planning grant from the State in FY13 to develop its Maryland Sports Experience project, which calls for the renovation of both facilities, and a new business model that would rely on a variety of revenue sources beyond gate receipts, the primary resource of the original, failed business model developed for Sports Legends in 2005.

Part of the ‘makeover’ of Sports Legends is the opening-up of the first floor east wing, made possible by eliminating non-load-bearing walls and shifting exhibits so as to accommodate after-hour rentals of 200 sit-down guests or more. Currently, Legends can only seat 90 guests together, which costs the museum six-figures in lost rental income annually.

The \$250,000 grant request for FY16, in conjunction with State funding carried over from a FY15 grant and private funding, will facilitate those necessary first-floor changes. If the museum is forced to vacate the facility, the \$250,000, obviously, will not be spent. The Foundation challenges the DLS recommendation to reject the \$250,000 grant request because Sports Legends has failed to make rent payments to MSA since last August. The Foundation, which for the past year has worked with the Speaker’s office and the Governor’s office, as well as any number of state senators and delegates, negotiated through the previous administration and in cooperation with MSA officials an arrangement wherein the State would cover nine months of Sports Legends rent (\$201,087) through a State Deficiency Fund, thus giving the Foundation until June 30, 2015 to present a new business model that would demonstrate that Sports Legends could pay rent starting July 1, 2015.

Accordingly, the Foundation's board of directors, headed by former MSA chairman John Moag, and with strong support from M&T Bank and the France-Merrick Foundation, has taken steps to develop a new business strategy, and is confident that it can effectively demonstrate the merits of that strategy, and ensuing financial stability, to MSA and State officials. From the Orioles and Ravens to Michael Phelps and Johnny U, Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards is home to the largest collection of state sports memorabilia in America, a hallowed place that preserves and celebrates the 'real deal' of Maryland's unique sports heritage. We hope the State will continue with its steadfast support of this important cultural project.

