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New Home in Tampa Is Rays' Only Hope

By [Marc Lancaster](#)

MLB Writer & Editor | Follow on Twitter: [@MarcLancaster](#)

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There's a story people around the Tampa Bay baseball franchise like to tell, dating from the Devil [Rays](#) days, that illustrates just how provincial and petty the business of geographical identification can be.

It seems that a high-ranking club official, attending a Devil Rays game at Yankee Stadium, flew into a rage when the scoreboards in the Bronx listed the visiting team as "Tampa" rather than "Tampa Bay." Thankfully, the egregious oversight was corrected and said official could move on with his life, but such slips of the keyboard -- and tongue -- were then, and continue to be a point of contention for some in St. Petersburg.

That's the Rays' actual hometown, by the way. But not for much longer. For as much as some in the city that lies across the bay from Tampa persist in arguing otherwise, it has become completely unreasonable to advocate keeping the franchise in St. Petersburg.

The Rays need a new stadium, and they need it to be on the Tampa side of the bay. And after years of playing nice with St. Pete officials, Rays principal owner [Stuart Sternberg](#) finally [said as much](#) Monday.

"When I assumed control of the Rays almost five years ago, it was commonly assumed that winning would change everything at Tropicana Field," Sternberg said at a news conference. "Everyone believed that with a winning team on the field, fans would fill the stands. That has not been the case.

"Our ability to compete and, quite frankly, to survive rests on our ability to attract people and businesses to our ballpark. Our customers are our fans. And like any other business, we need to be in a location that is convenient for our fans to reach us."

Despite fielding one of baseball's most exciting teams and spending the bulk of this season either in first place or very near it, the Rays have an average attendance of just 22,301 through 33 home games. That puts them 23rd among major league teams, and most of those behind them are teams having horrible seasons, those that traditionally lag in attendance, or both.

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At this point, two years removed from that remarkable run to the World Series, Sternberg is well within his bounds in casting a wider net in his search of a long-term solution to the Rays' attendance woes. These days, that solution means only one thing: a new stadium.

That the Rays need one shouldn't be a matter of dispute for anyone. Now that the [Twins](#) have retired the Metrodome, the only major league facility that might be considered less palatable than Tropicana Field is Oakland's battle-weary Coliseum. The A's, of course, have waged a [long-running fight](#) for a new home they won't have to share with the Raiders, and they continue to seek a solution -- [perhaps in San Jose](#).

But while the A's biggest obstacle is trying not to step on the [San Francisco Giants'](#) territorial toes, the Rays' is the lease the team signed with the city of St. Petersburg that ties the franchise to the Trop through 2027. Sternberg's group has done much to upgrade the fan experience at the majors' last non-retractable dome since taking over, but further cosmetic improvements don't figure to make any more of a dent on the attendance front.



Chris O'Meara, AP

The powers that be in St. Petersburg understand this, and they have been on board with the team in exploring options for a new ballpark. You may recall

that the team already has seen one such proposal fall through. In November 2007, the Rays announced plans for a [new open-air ballpark](#) featuring a sail-like roof that was to have been wedged into a piece of the St. Petersburg waterfront and ready by 2012. That proposal met significant enough opposition that the Rays pulled it off the table seven months later.

Into the void stepped a group known as ABC, which was tasked with studying other potential sites. The coalition studies a number of factors, with particular weight given to proximity to population centers in the area, and came back with three recommendations. Two of those three proposed sites were in Tampa -- one in the Westshore area near the airport and the other in downtown close to where the Tampa Bay Lightning currently play.

Stack up the numbers any way you like; they all point to any new stadium being on the Tampa side of the bay. But St. Pete and its elected officials just don't want to let the Rays go, and they have a pretty significant legal hammer in their arsenal in that 2027 lease. If the Rays decided to remain in Pinellas County, breaking the lease wouldn't be as much of a concern because revenues from the new ballpark would stay, too. That wouldn't be the case if the team crossed over to Tampa and Hillsborough County, and therefore politicians are doing what politicians do.

Which in this case could amount to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. If St. Petersburg prevents the team from moving to Tampa, Sternberg could very well end up exploring relocation much farther afield. Charlotte, Las Vegas, New Jersey, Brooklyn -- who knows? But you can be assured any options besides Tampa will require a much, much longer trip for Pinellas County Rays fans than the drive across the Howard Frankland Bridge from St. Pete.

That was a point Sternberg made sure to drive home Monday.

"Baseball in the Tampa Bay area does not belong to Stu Sternberg, just as it doesn't belong to St. Petersburg or Tampa, Pinellas or Hillsborough," he said. "It is a regional asset. It belongs to our fans throughout the region. For this asset to be preserved, a comprehensive process to explore a new ballpark must begin. That process needs to consider all possible locations throughout Tampa Bay -- meaning Tampa and Hillsborough as well."

Sternberg has given no indications at any point that he really wants to move the team out of the area, and he has followed through on all of his pledges since taking over. He already has said the Rays will have to cut payroll significantly this winter, and even with the abundant talent remaining in Tampa Bay's farm system it's going to be difficult for the franchise to remain viable without the revenue streams a new stadium would bring.

Obviously, a new ballpark isn't a cure-all -- especially in this economy. But Sternberg has been exceptionally patient to this point when it comes to the stadium situation, and he can't afford to maintain the status quo indefinitely.

St. Petersburg is well within its rights to fight for the Rays, but it must understand that winning that battle could mean losing the team.

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