June 18, 2010

To Hamilton City Council,

As arbitration is underway for the future Pan Am/Ticat stadium I would like, as a Hamilton taxpayer and Tiger Cat season ticket holder, to express my thoughts on Bob Young’s objections to the west-harbour site and his open letter to the city. This is a pivotal moment in Hamilton’s history and I am one of many Hamiltonians concerned that we may lose the west-harbour location during arbitration if the Tiger Cats wear down members of Council with a campaign of misinformation, fear and intimidation. Even if the Ticats intimate they’ll move the team out of the city I encourage members of Council to stand firm with your original commitment to the west-harbour location and make it a non-negotiable item in the arbitration process.

Bob Young needs to recognize that what’s good for the city of Hamilton is good for the Tiger Cats and moreover great cities are built from the inside-out, not the outside-in. The new stadium has the potential to be a jewel in the core of Hamilton and encourage revitalization that is already taking place in this city. To stick a jewel in a parking lot on the edge of town that can only be accessed by cars is backwards thinking these days and would be laughable if Mr. Young weren’t actually convincing people it’s a good idea. Hamilton is evolving into a very progressive city with lots of exciting things happening in arts, culture, education, high-tech research, digital media, etc. It would be a missed opportunity to put the stadium anywhere outside of the city-core. In my opinion the only reasonable debate is whether Hamilton can afford to have a new stadium or afford not to have a new stadium, the location is a no-brainer.

There is an undertone in Bob Young’s letter to the city that suggests the downtown core is far too backwards to be revitalized anytime soon and is therefore a bad investment. I’m sure you’ll agree he’s simply wrong about this. The west-harbour site is an ideal place to show off the beauty as well as the rising culture that Hamilton has to offer. The work that’s been done on Bayfront park and Pier 4 park is shows off a beautiful side of Hamilton that most people are completely unaware of. From an arts and culture perspective James Street North is just one example of how Hamilton is quickly evolving into a cutting-edge destination for people in the arts. Hamilton has created a buzz and talent is being drawn in from all over the GTA. I’m in the video and new media industry and the level of talent that has recently moved to Hamilton from Toronto is both exhilarating and nerve-wracking. Comparisons are being made to Queen Street West in Toronto before the big companies moved in and drove rents up.

Bob Young is trying to convince City Council as well as the rest of the public that the Ticats are doomed to financial failure if they locate in the west-harbour. There are so many flaws in his arguments that I feel compelled to comment on them just in case Councilors hadn’t already considered it. He says the Montreal Alouettes and Montreal Expos went bankrupt because they were playing in the “wrong stadium in the wrong part of town”. In fact the outdated and crumbling Olympic Stadium was the real problem for the Alouettes. The poor sightlines for baseball were part of the problem for the Expos as were a raft of other problems including the baseball players strike in 1994 and a weak Canadian dollar trying to compete in a league full of rich US cities. All of this
was completely unrelated to the location of the stadium. Today downtown Montreal is home to the Bell Centre, which is ranked as one of the top 10 busiest stadiums in the world and usually has the highest attendance records in all of Canada. The “wrong stadium in the wrong part of town” analogy does apply to Ivor Wynne stadium in its current location (as much as I love Ivor Wynne and the east end of the Hammer!) but it certainly does not apply to a brand new stadium on Hamilton’s west-harbour. Mr. Young will be in the enviable position of having direct input into the design of a state-of-the-art stadium and have it subsidized by all levels of government!

Mr. Young sites the Miami Arena as a “famous example” of a “build it and they will come” philosophy ending in disaster. This example actually bolsters the case for a new stadium in the west-harbour of Hamilton. The Miami Arena was considered outdated before they finished building it (no luxury suites, outdated concessions etc.) and was located in Overtown, one of the poorest areas in all of Miami. Mr. Young correctly states that the private sector and the public never came and the Florida panthers and Miami Heat vacated the building... however he neglects to mention that the Miami Heat relocated to the American Airlines Arena, a modern facility just a few blocks away on the waterfront in downtown Miami. This is essentially the same scenario as the Tiger Cats relocating from its current Ivor Wynne location to a modern stadium along Hamilton’s waterfront. The Miami Heat are a highly successful NBA franchise and Bob Young’s “famous example” illustrates how the private and public sector will come together to support a well-run team in a well-chosen downtown location.

Many workable solutions can be found to satisfy the traffic and parking concerns that Mr. Young has raised including bike lanes and the proposed rapid-transit system. Bob Young is grasping at straws with his concern for the families whose “enjoyment of their neighbourhood will either be damaged by additional roads and parking lots, or by hours of traffic before and after every event held at the stadium if no other roads are built.” I certainly haven’t heard any public outcry from families concerned about eleven Tiger Cat home games destroying their enjoyment of the neighbourhood. With all due respect I don’t believe Bob Young spends enough time in Hamilton walking the streets, talking to people and getting a real sense of what this city has to offer and what Hamiltonians are feeling and thinking. We are excited to see our city changing for the better and we will enthusiastically rally around the Tiger Cats in a modern downtown stadium. Since Bob Young has taken over the Ticats he has done a fairly remarkable job of marketing the team, creating an exciting, family-friendly buzz at the games and boosting attendance significantly. He has done all of this with an outdated stadium in a rough part of town with a team that has the worst record in franchise history! Bob Young needs only to focus on keeping a competitive team on the field; the fans will happily come to a brand-new stadium along Hamilton’s waterfront!

Thank you Members of Council for your hard work during these tense negotiations,

Lee Hillman