

THE NEIGHBORHOODS

Community counts this time

Uprooting residents, businesses in '65 left bitter taste officials want to avoid

By Alma E. Hill
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The Olympic stadium and future home of the Braves already has scored more points with its neighbors than Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.

Residents in the neighborhoods of Summerhill, Mechanicsville and Peopletown learned from the bitter lessons of the first stadium and have become more successful in protecting their interests.

Mattie Ansley Jackson still remembers the short notice her family was given more than 30 years ago to vacate a rental house near Glen and Crumbly streets to make room for a parking lot.

"It left me kind of angry because we weren't notified earlier," Jackson recalls. "We didn't even know what was going on, and we were given 30 days to move."

By the time the stadium was completed in 1965, the city's \$18 million urban renewal program had displaced more than 5,500 families; all but 426 of whom were black. Gone too were the bakery, the dairy, the grocery stores, the dentist's office and the segregated library.

"At the time we weren't allowed to go into the library," Jackson said, "but it was there."

In 1974, the city paid \$2 million to purchase land to develop a commercial district for Peopletown. But instead of attracting businesses, the property became another stadium parking lot.

When the official lots filled up, fly-by-night parking businesses cropped up in back yards, vacant lots and driveways — anywhere there was an unused piece of land.

Meanwhile, the ratio of homeowners to renters decreased in Summerhill, Mechanicsville and Peopletown. Crime and poverty escalated. New development was almost nil. There wasn't even a full-service grocery store.

Stadiums in other cities have had a similar impact on neighboring communities.

Denver residents who live near McNichols Arena (home of the NBA Nuggets) and Mile High Stadium (where the NFL Broncos play) say the facilities contribute to poverty, traffic, illegal parking and late-night noise.

And community activists in Baltimore accuse Oriole Park at Camden Yards of breeding trash, traffic and crime for half of the year, sitting empty and unused the other half.

News that ACOG wanted to build the Olympic stadium across the street from Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium caught the three neighborhoods by surprise.

So Jackson, Gene Ferguson, Douglas Dean, Ethel Mae Matthews and other longtime residents came up with a list of demands to protect their neighborhoods.

What's the name?

The Atlanta Braves' new ballpark doesn't have a name yet — and probably won't until right before it opens in 1997.

The team could sell the naming rights to a corporation.

"It may well be commercial, and I'm not going to get any votes for that," Braves president Stan Kasten said. "Even if we don't sell the name, we're still going to put a lot of thought into it."

Should it memorialize the feats of home run champion Henry Aaron or former mayor Ivan Allen, who brought pro sports to Atlanta? Should it celebrate its location in the capital of the South?

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"Your second time at the table you ought to be smarter than the first time around," Summerhill resident Kathy Davis said. "My hat's off to Mattie Jackson and Gene Ferguson because they knew the questions to ask."

With support from the city and Fulton County governments, the communities were able to get most of the concessions they requested.

"I feel better about the new stadium," Jackson said. "We were really raped by the other stadium. But this time, they really haven't taken anything from us."

Olympic organizers made Jackson an ACOG board member. And they created the Stadium Neighborhood Task Force, which Jackson co-chairs, to give Summerhill, Peopletown and Mechanicsville residents a forum to ask questions and make recommendations about the stadium construction.

ACOG also placed a staff member in the offices of Summerhill Neighborhood Inc. (SNI) so residents can drop by for the latest information on stadium developments or street closures.

"The community relations has really been the key to keeping it as peaceful as it is," said Sharon Collins, who has lived in Mechanicsville all her life. "Any time you know what's going on, or at least have someone you can question, it's a whole different ballgame."

The neighborhoods also scored points with their demands for traffic control.

The Braves agreed to limit parking around the stadium to 8,700 spaces, instead of the 10,000 they initially sought, when they take over the facility after the Games.

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tributed \$300,000 as a down payment.

"That is the number one reason the Olympic stadium has been more beneficial to us than the Atlanta stadium," said Dean, president of SNI.

Local residents also got a commitment from ACOG to hire people from the three communities for stadium construction jobs. Olympic organizers donated \$150,000 to start a job-training program.

Even the physical design of the new stadium has neighborhood support.

The \$209 million facility is close to the street and appears to be part of the Summerhill community, whereas Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium is isolated in the middle of a concrete ocean.

"It looks like a space ship. It doesn't relate to anybody but itself and the events inside it," said Herman Cruz, an urban designer who helped develop Summerhill's revitalization plan.

But Kasten still views his team's future home as a world unto itself.

When asked his opinion of how the new stadium will fit in with the surrounding community, Kasten described the view fans will see from the south side of the facility's upper deck.

"You will think you're in a park," Kasten said. "We're able to create our own neighborhood if we're smart about it. So that's what we've done."

Although the Braves' top priority is the regular-season schedule of 81 games they'll play in the stadium, Cruz anticipates the facility will give the communities a boost they wouldn't have had otherwise.

"It has focused attention to the fact that you have a diamond surrounded by charcoal," Cruz said.

"Whether good or bad, it's attention that hasn't been there before. The job of the community now is to turn that attention into action."