



A CONVERSATION WITH **RUSS BRANDON**

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No new stadium right now

RUSS BRANDON DISCUSSES BUSINESS OF SPORTS

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Russ Brandon has heard all the rumblings about a new downtown stadium for the Buffalo Bills.

As the team's managing partner and president – and president of the Buffalo Sabres and chief operating officer of Pegula Sports and Entertainment – it comes with the turf. But none of the conjecture has come from Bills management.

Ehoing statements by Terry Pegula, owner of the Bills and Sabres, Brandon said there is no “sense of urgency” to consider building a stadium. Especially after New Era Field underwent a \$130 million renovation, jointly paid for by the team, Erie County and New York state.

He spoke Oct. 4 at an event presented by Business First and Hodgson Russ LLP titled “A Conversation on Sports with Russ Brandon.”

He dismissed speculation that there are private talks being held regarding a new stadium, saying, “We’re not doing anything right now.”

The just-completed renovations, which were central to a 10-year lease extension negotiated three years ago, “have been very successful for this franchise,” he said.

Economic realities will play a significant role in any future stadium discussions.

Items such as pricey personal seat licenses used as revenue generators in other NFL stadiums are not a likely scenario in Western New York.

“We have to be very true to who we are to the community,” Brandon said.

But while the Bills have strong corporate and individual support, the region lacks Fortune 500 companies.

Minneapolis/St. Paul, which recently welcomed a new stadium for the Minnesota Vikings, has 25 Fortune 500 firms headquartered in the Twin Cities.

The New York Giants charge \$100,000 per seat in PSLs for a seat on the 50-yard line in MetLife Stadium.

“That’s not us,” he said.



ALL PHOTOS: JIM COURTNEY

Buffalo Bills President and Managing Partner Russ Brandon said no one has to remind him that the team hasn't made the NFL playoffs in 16 years. “My children remind me that I've had 16 lousy Christmases in a row,” he said. Speaking to the invitation-only crowd at Hodgson Russ LLP's downtown headquarters, he said strong corporate support is critical for the team.



Any decision about a new stadium, if and when that day comes, will require lots of input from the community, business sector and government agencies.

“It will have to be a very macro, community decision,” Bran-

don said. “It has to be a very smart, thoughtful decision and one that can be quantified.”

Other topics were discussed during the event:

► The game plan to regionalize the Buffalo Bills in terms of season

ticket sales and corporate support has been successful and played a central role in the team's 1998 and 2013 lease negotiations.

Shifting the annual training camp to the St. John Fisher College campus in suburban Rochester has paid off in a big way.

“People in Rochester used to call the team the Buffalo Bills and we wanted them to call the team ‘our Buffalo Bills.’ They now do,” Brandon said.

Rochester-area residents and businesses have gone from accounting for just 6 percent of ticket buyers to 18 percent.

In addition, Rochester's private sector is a significant part of suite and premium seat holders.

► Brandon said he was not a fan of the “Toronto series” in which the Bills played eight home pre-season and regular season games in the Rogers Centre. Rogers Communications paid the team \$78 million for the games.

The real motivation behind the series was to land more ticket buyers and suite holders from the luca-

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► CLOSER LOOK

The conversation with Russ Brandon was part of an ongoing series of discussions with business leaders.

Throughout the year, decision-makers from diverse Western New York industries meet for discussions moderated by Business First journalists.

Following the event, excerpts from the conversation are published.

Upcoming topics include foundations, banking, family-run businesses and health care.

The discussions, sponsored by Hodgson Russ LLP, are held at the law firm's Pearl Street offices in Buffalo.



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RUSS BRANDON, managing partner and president, Buffalo Bills

After team founder Ralph Wilson Jr. died two years ago, Brandon said, the Pegulas and other prospective buyers were aware that the Buffalo-based New Era was interested in the stadium naming rights.

But a deal wasn't pursued until the

Pegulas completed their \$1.4 billion deal to buy the Bills.

“We wanted to provide the new owners, whoever they were, with a clean building,” Brandon said. “We wanted the new owners to make that decision.”

► The Buffalo Sabres remain interested in hosting another NHL Winter Classic and have talked to the league about that issue, he said.

The stadium in Orchard Park hosted the first New Year's Day Winter Classic in 2008. All 72,000 seats sold out in less than one hour.

According to Brandon, the Sabres and Buffalo are interested in hosting the NCAA's Frozen Four men's hockey championship series.

The Sabres hosted the 2003 Frozen Four.

“We keep pitching it (to the NCAA) and we would love to have it,” Brandon said.

► With KeyBank Center now 20 years old, he said the downtown sports and entertainment venue may need to be upgraded. That issue is being discussed internally.

The same is true for Rochester's BlueCross Arena, home to the Rochester Americans, which is the Sabres' American Hockey League affiliate.

Critics have said the arena is outdated.

Because of the condition, the Sabres opted to shift a planned pre-season game in Rochester to the Pegula Sports Arena on the Penn State campus in State College.

“It is very substandard,” Brandon said, referring to BlueCross Arena. “We are talking with people in Rochester about that.”

tive Southern Ontario market.

It worked.

Southern Ontario residents and businesses now make up about 20 percent of the season ticket buyers and suite holders.

“It wasn't about playing a game in Toronto,” he said. “It was about bringing that fan base to the stadium.”

► The deal with New Era Cap Co. to acquire naming rights for the stadium was “five years in the making,” Brandon said.

The five-year deal, which includes option years, was announced in August.

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