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Rose Bowl Hopes to Bet Future on a Makeover



Long Photography, via Associated Press

The Rose Bowl renovation project, which would start in January 2011, would be completed in four years.

By BILLY WITZ
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PASADENA, Calif. — As parade floats were being prepared nearby and workers busied themselves with final touches to the Rose Bowl, the 87-year-old stadium looked as ready as ever for the two close-ups it will receive in the next week. First, it will host, as it always does, the Rose Bowl game on New Year's Day. Then, six days later, it will be home to the [Bowl Championship Series](#) title game.

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But as Darryl Dunn, the general manager of the stadium, stood in the middle of an immaculately manicured field, an enormous red rose painted in the center, his gaze carried beyond the elliptical, tree-lined rim of the Rose Bowl and past the San Gabriel Mountains, which frame it.

"This place is almost like a walking museum, there's such great, great history here," Dunn said. "But what about the future? The next 12 months are going to define the next 50 years."

For Dunn and other officials, after a week of being at the center of the college football world, the real work will begin: completing plans and applying for bonds for a \$164 million renovation of the stadium. The project, which would start in January 2011, would be completed four

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Creating a sense of urgency is the economy. Interest rates and construction costs have fallen in the last year, and the deadline for federal stimulus funds, which the Rose Bowl would be eligible for, is Dec. 31, 2010.

“The window of opportunity to make this work, really, is today,” said Michael Beck, the city manager of Pasadena, which owns the stadium. “Two years ago, we couldn’t afford to do it. Two years from now, interest rates will be higher and construction costs are likely to be higher. This is the perfect economy to make an investment in.”

Asked about the wisdom of investing in a stadium, a strategy that has left many municipalities in dire financial straits, Beck conceded there was some risk.

“But there’s also the other risk,” Beck said. “That’s the risk of not doing anything.”

The danger of that strategy is illustrated in Miami, where the Orange Bowl stadium, built in the same era as the Rose Bowl and itself an iconic site, no longer exists.

It was once home to the [Dolphins](#), the [University of Miami](#) and Super Bowls, as well as the Orange Bowl game. But when the Dolphins owner Joe Robbie could not persuade city officials to add suites to the Orange Bowl in the 1980s, he built his own stadium and moved the Dolphins. The Super Bowls followed. [Then the Orange Bowl game](#). And finally, the University of Miami.

As each tenant left, revenue declined. The stadium eventually deteriorated beyond repair.

“Then the question became, what are you going to do with this dinosaur?” Dunn said.

In 2008, [it was razed](#) to make way for a baseball stadium.

The question of what to do with the Rose Bowl is one that Dunn has been grappling with since he was hired 10 years ago. The city had recently written off \$8.7 million in debt and there were fears that if the [N.F.L.](#) were to build a new stadium in Los Angeles, the Rose Bowl could lose its main tenant, [U.C.L.A.](#)

That motivated Pasadena officials in 2003 to pursue a deal with the N.F.L. in which the league would pay for a \$500 million renovation of the stadium in exchange for being allowed to operate it.

But the proposal bitterly divided the community. Residents who lived in the historic homes that surrounded the Arroyo Seco, the narrow canyon in which the bowl sits, were adamantly opposed to bringing N.F.L. crowds into their neighborhood. (The memory of [Raiders](#) fans endures.) And preservationists protested that the changes the N.F.L. wanted to make would alter the character of the stadium and jeopardize its status as a National Historic Landmark. They pointed to Soldier Field, whose landmark status was revoked after a renovation that some critics lampooned as a spaceship crashing into the old stadium.

“That was a wake-up call because it highlighted what could happen to us,” said Sue Mossman, executive director of Pasadena Heritage, a preservation group. “The Rose Bowl would no longer be the Rose Bowl because there was no way to marry the historic qualities that give the Rose Bowl its essence and a new state-of-the-art N.F.L. stadium.”

The [City Council](#) gave \$1 million to the Rose Bowl Operating Company, which Dunn manages, to explore other options. He had just about exhausted it by the summer of 2008, when he took his son to see Fenway Park, a place Dunn had visited frequently while growing up in Connecticut.

Short on money and ideas, Dunn called Janet Marie Smith, who as the Red Sox’ vice

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president for planning and development oversaw the improvements that were made at Fenway after the team was sold in 2002 to John Henry, one of the few prospective owners who did not want a new stadium for the team. They met and soon Smith and her team were in Pasadena as consultants, researching the Rose Bowl, interviewing community leaders and studying the possibilities.

What helped was that the same conservation ethic that existed in Boston was alive in Pasadena, whose downtown revitalization in the 1980s was pivotal in the city's financial turnaround. If much of Los Angeles is a testament to development run amok, Pasadena is keen on embracing its heritage.

"In Southern California, newer is better in many people's minds," Mossman said. "That's why they come here, that's why they want to live here — to reinvent themselves. It's often identified as the most cutting edge, least traditional place. All this old history nonsense feels out of place for many. But the old neighborhoods, the great architecture, the sense of community are what makes Pasadena a special place. It's why people want to live here, shop here and work here. It's money in the bank."

The plan that Smith developed called for more modest improvements and, in keeping with the rest of the neighborhood, for turning the clock back as well as forward.

The scoreboard at the south end of the stadium will be replaced by a 1940s replica, and at the north end, much of the signage will be stripped away and replaced by a high-definition video board. The bottom 10 rows, with notoriously poor views, will be ripped out along the sidelines and replaced by the hedges that once enveloped the field. Aisles will be added and tunnels widened, allowing for easier access. And the concessions, which ring the building, will be reconfigured to be more efficient and redesigned to reflect the Craftsman-style of the neighborhood.

"Some of it is born out of sentiment, but it's also born out of practicality," Smith said. "There's an important reality on communities and sports teams that you don't always have to start over."

Perhaps the most critical part of the renovation is the overhaul of the press box, which houses suites. Its height would not change, pleasing the preservationists, but it would extend farther from the stadium, increasing the suite capacity from 600 to 2,500. Those suites, and other premium seating, would help generate \$100 million to pay off the bonds, according to preliminary estimates. Other revenue streams are expected to come from advertising around the stadium and selective major events, like a [U2](#) concert earlier this year. There will also be an effort to solicit philanthropic donors, though there remains uncertainty over how much that would generate.

"We're a stadium," Dunn said. "We don't have an alumni base."

The Tournament of Roses and U.C.L.A. have been supportive, but are also wary that their concerns are met. U.C.L.A. agreed to a 20-year lease after receiving assurances that the locker rooms would be renovated, which they were in 2007, quadrupling to 12,000 square feet. About \$43 million remains on bonds from that renovation and earlier projects.

In the next two months, Dunn said, the numbers will have to be crunched more firmly to make sure they all add up.

"The funding is the biggest challenge, no question about it," Dunn said. "But what we're doing is modest and incremental. The day you stop reinvesting is the day you start to lose it. We want to make the Rose Bowl better and we've never had a better opportunity."

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