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District on the defense

As new arenas quickly take shape, disagreements continue to hamper progress on the body established to serve stadium-area neighborhoods.

By [R. Jonathan Tuleya](#)
November 28, 2002

The \$1-million **Stadium Complex Special Services District** remains powerless, its members locked in a stalemate and -- some say -- manipulated by outside influences almost 10 months after its board members first met.



Some on the board of directors had ambitious goals that the body -- created by the mayor with input from the residents to help alleviate the problems associated with the stadium complex -- would be up and running by the start of the Eagles season back in September.

Now it looks as if it would take a miracle for the group to meet again before the Phillies start spring training.

The latest drama occurred last Tuesday. The seven board members had that date set for a meeting since September. The agenda included hiring an executive director to handle the day-to-day business of the district.

From more than 70 applications submitted to the board, members had whittled the field to three finalists. The board was set to vote, but was prevented from doing so when Ted Scairato, who represents the Broad Street West Civic Association neighborhoods, and John Sfrisi, representative for the South Philadelphia Communities Civic Association, bowed out of the meeting at the last minute.

The bylaws of the SCSSD state at least three of the four neighborhood directors must be present to hold an official meeting. Without Sfrisi and Scairato, no vote could be taken.

"That's why you have an alternate. You know this is a fraud," said Capozzi, who represents Packer Park. "It's a contrived absence to leverage different things that they want."

She accused Scairato and Sfrisi of filibustering because they suspected the executive director candidate they favored would not win the board's vote.

"It is so important that the neighbors know what is going on," Capozzi said. "The neighbors need to know and be upset."

The no-shows also disappointed Judy Cerrone, who represents the Veterans Stadium Neighbors Civic Association and the Stadium Community Council neighborhoods.

"These candidates could all get other jobs in the meantime," Cerrone said. "We are liable to lose these good guys we have on the list now."

Scairato, vice president of the SCSSD, admitted in an interview Monday he bailed on the meeting to protest the vote for executive director. Sfrisi, the district's treasurer, did not return calls for comment.

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Scairato maintains he did not skip out because the executive director candidate he supported was destined to lose, as Capozzi suspected.

"We didn't want that [vote] until backgrounds are checked," Scairato said. "There are a lot of questions. You just don't jump into something when you are trying to secure a good executive director."

He also wants to see a contract drafted with salary and job requirements before members vote, he said. Until that can take place, he said he is content with the board members governing the district.

"What rush is there?" he asked. "The object is to get someone who is qualified. Somebody who acts to the benefit of the people in the area."

Cerrone contends there is a sense of urgency. Homes in her neighborhood sit a mere 150 feet from Veterans Stadium. In less than 18 months, demolition will likely begin on the old arena and Cerrone wants to make sure the people in her community are protected.

Homeowners are asking her if they should buy extra insurance for their houses to protect against damage that could be caused when crews begin knocking down the Vet -- it has not been determined whether the stadium will be imploded or taken apart piece by piece.

Capozzi noted she spent six months preparing her neighborhood for the implosion of the Naval Hospital last year. The homes closest to that building were 500 feet away.

She added salary and contract terms will be negotiated individually with the candidate.

Additionally, the bylaws governing the SCSSD state that Cerrone's district gets first dibs on many of the city services governed by the district during stadium events -- like police and sanitation -- because it is so close to the complex.

Attorney Robert Scandone faxed a letter to John Page, president of the SCSSD and senior vice president and general manager of the First Union complex for Comcast Spectacor, last Monday on behalf of Scairato and Sfrisi. It informed Page that the two district directors would not be attending the meeting scheduled for the next day.

The letter offered no explanation. Page replied with a letter of his own on Tuesday. In it, he stated that he informed Scandone that Scairato and Sfrisi should contact him directly when they cannot attend a meeting. Page downplayed the situation during an interview Monday.

"These things come up," Page said. "At some point in time, we will get the group together and will be able to make a decision so we can move forward."

When told that Scairato skipped the meeting in protest, he said he was unaware of the community leader's stand, but would not comment further on it.

The special services district representing Center City endured similar problems during its formation, Page said. He also said he did not believe someone outside of the SCSSD was influencing members.

Scairato also denied that anyone instructed him to miss last Tuesday's meeting.

"We have never been involved in the 31 years since [Veterans Stadium] was built," Scairato said. "Now that we are being recognized, we are not going to be pushed around by people. We are looking out for our area."

Mayor Street promised the special services district two years ago. The district became the linchpin in the stadium deal and ultimately convinced the civic associations to allow the city to build both the Eagles and Phillies stadiums in South Philly.

It took a year for the civic leaders, city and attorneys for both sides to negotiate the bylaws for the SCSSD before agreeing to terms in January.

The special services district spans the blocks between Oregon Avenue and Interstate-95 from Seventh through 20th streets. A seven-person board comprised of four community directors and three directors representing the Eagles, Phillies and Comcast Spectacor governs the district. Board members are responsible for hiring the executive director.

Three of the four community directors were elected from the neighborhoods represented by the Packer Park Civic (District 2), South Philadelphia Communities Civic (District 3), and Broad Street West Civic Association (District 4). Residents represented by Veterans Stadium Neighbors Civic and Stadium Community Council comprised District 1.

The district's \$1-million budget is being funded by the city for the first year. Next year, the teams will split the bill.

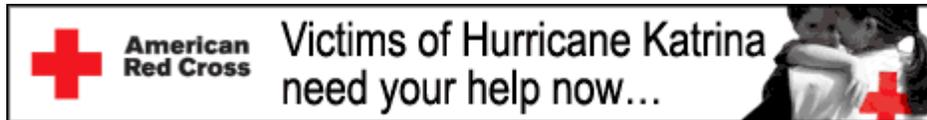
In February, the American Arbitration Association mailed ballots to every resident in each of the four districts to elect a representative. On March 6, the winner of the director and alternate director posts in each neighborhood were announced. The same day, the SCSSD held its first meeting.

Back in April, similar fighting erupted among the neighborhood representatives. Some of the other leaders accused Capozzi of pushing her own agenda on the district. Outnumbered, Capozzi had minimal influence on board decisions then.

"But now, it is a little bit different," said Capozzi, who has the majority on her side.

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