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Vet remains a dump with parking lot delayed

Neighbors grumble over endless rumble at S. Philly site
DAVID GAMBACORTA gambacd
@phillynews.com

BY NOW, almost a year after Veterans Stadium was blown to bits, the stadium's concrete rubble should have been ground up and paved over.

But tons of the Vet's broken corpse still litter the sleek new stadium complex. That puts construction of Citizens Bank Park's parking lot six months behind schedule. It means another Phillies Opening Day could arrive in a couple weeks with less parking for fans. And it guarantees the Phillies' war with their South Philadelphia neighbors will rage for a while longer.

Some 2,300 spaces still have to be created in the footprint of the Vet, but the construction equipment, the noise and the dirt should've been gone in October. The neighborhood should be back to normal.

Instead, the Phillies are racing to finish the parking lot in time for their Home Opener on April 4. But if the rest of March turns out to be wet, the team says, delays could continue.

This is not good news to the people who live nearby. They're already angry that the Vet demolition contractors rejected claims that the old stadium's implosion damaged some homes and that the city broke its promise to build a driveway behind a street that was within shouting distance of the Vet.

"We feel like we've had it. I just wish they would get it done," said Judy Cerrone, who fields neighborhood complaints for the **Sports Complex Special Services District**. "Everyone is tired of the noise from the trucks and having their homes shake every day."

It's unclear why it has taken so long to clean up the Vet site. The demolition contract failed to include a completion deadline for the parking lot.

The contractors, Brandenburg Industrial Service Co. and Demolition Dynamics, only would have incurred fines if they didn't finish the new ballpark on time, the Phillies said.

"There's no one thing you can point to," explained John Stranix, the Citizens Bank Park project manager. "We had hoped to have everything done by last football season."

He blamed bad weather for much of the delay in finishing the new parking lot. "The weather is our biggest enemy," he said. "Every day we're not out there compacting soil, it puts us behind."

Workers can't compact soil for the new parking lot if it's wet or frozen, Stranix said, or "you could end up with depressions and sinkholes, and the sub-base could deteriorate."

It took just 62 seconds for the Vet's concrete columns to drop like dominoes last March 21.

Its tons of concrete remains were supposed to have been crushed, compacted and paved over by the beginning of October, just in time for the start of playoff baseball and Eagles season. But the concrete grinding and filling took longer than expected, Stranix said. Stadium neighbors are tired of the excuses.

"Sure, we're sick of them working," said Louis Spina, 72, who lives on 13th Street near Packer Avenue. "It was disconcerting at first to hear them all the time, but I learned to block it out after a while. Still, they need to finish it already."

Stranix maintained that the team won't have a parking shortage, even if the lot isn't finished on time.

He said the Phillies don't have as much of a parking demand as the Eagles, who draw more than 68,000 fans to games.

When work is finished, Citizens Bank Park will have 21,000 parking spaces. The ballpark can hold 43,500 people. Fans can also park at Lincoln Financial Field and the Wachovia Center's parking lots.

The city also has some prime spaces close to the ballpark, but the price is steep. For years, private vendors charged Phillies and Eagles fans \$10 to park in FDR Park, Broad Street and Pattison Avenue.

The price doubled last year when the city and the Fairmount Park Commission took control of the game-day parking duties.

"We were upset with the conditions of the park and the way the job was being done. We decided we'd handle it ourselves," said city Managing Director Phil Goldsmith.

Ballpark neighbors also are griping that the Vet Stadium demolition damaged their houses. The demolition contractors had \$61 million in insurance to cover potential damage claims, but about 20 residents say their claims were denied, based on seismograph readings they don't understand.

Complaints ranged from cracked walls to broken windows, said Cerrone. Many of the claims were from people who live on Geary Street near Broad, which is only about 150 feet away from where the Vet once stood.

"We were all worried about our homes during the implosion," said Jill DiRienzo, 83, whose house on Geary Street overlooks mounds of dirt and construction equipment.

She said pre-existing cracks in her home worsened from the Vet implosion. But her claim for damage, she said, was rejected by the demolition contractor.

"They told us they couldn't have caused this," DiRienzo sighed, shaking her head. "They said they would take care of everything. Now, they're not doing anything."

Brandenburg officials wouldn't comment and referred questions to the Phillies. Neighbors say they're further enraged that the demolition contractor responded to damage complaints at the same leisurely pace it brought to the Vet cleanup.

Cerrone said residents who called the company to file complaints didn't get an answer to their claims for months.

"We found out early on that the neighbors weren't getting the responsiveness they were looking for, so we asked them to improve that," Stranix said of the demolition contractor. "My approach is nothing is made better by avoidance."

The contractor has been rejecting damage claims by invoking seismograph readings that determined the implosion blast wasn't strong enough to damage the homes, officials said. "The scientific data said [the implosion] won't cause this damage," said Stranix, explaining the contractor's position.

The Phillies back Brandenburg's conclusions and note that neighbors had their own experts look at the seismographs as well.

"I don't know that we ever got a response from their experts saying they disagreed," Stranix said. Still, the project manager pledged to make himself available to residents who are unhappy with the outcome of their claims.

"In meeting after meeting that we attended, all we kept hearing was that they had the insurance.

That's what gave people the comfort level," said City Council President Anna Verna.

"I don't know why they wouldn't want to satisfy the residents if we're just talking about cracks in the walls."

The Phillies can at least share some of the discontent directed their way with the city.

Geary Street residents blame the city and Mayor Street for breaking a promise, they say, to build a private driveway in the backs of their homes.

"We feel lousy," said Geary resident Louis Milici, 67. "The city promised to come through with a driveway. Am I surprised that they didn't? No."

The driveway in question was first mentioned at community stadium meetings in 2000.

Geary residents' homes were bordered in the back by a barbed-wire fence and an entrance to the Vet's parking lot and were without a driveway for emergency access or exit.

They hoped that the city would turn the old three-lane Vet entrance into a private common driveway and were encouraged when Street met with neighbors in November 2000.

Street detailed his meeting in a letter to Verna and attached a matrix that outlined issues raised by residents. The mayor said the letter and "the attached document constitutes my firm commitment to fully address the needs of the community," according to a copy viewed by the Daily News.

So what went wrong?

The city realized they would have had to reopen their lease with the Phillies to grant neighbors their driveway.

That process alone would have cost \$50,000.

The Phillies also concluded that the driveway would have caused them to alter their 150-foot-wide neighborhood berm at an estimated cost of \$300,000.

"The mayor committed to studying the feasibility of doing it," said Street's spokesman Dan Fee, but there were "huge difficulties to providing what they asked for."

The disgust was apparent on Milici's face. "This whole stadium thing has been a mess." *

Illustration:PHOTO

JENNIFER MIDBERRY/Daily News

REGINA RAHILL/Daily News

The minute of blasts it took to bring down the Vet (left, as seen from Geary Street), says Jill DiRienzo (top), has worsened slight cracks to her home.

JENNIFER MIDBERRY/Daily News

The site that was once the Vet should be a parking lot for Citizens Bank Park (background) by now, but is instead littered with construction materials for a project six months behind schedule.

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