

IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY SPIRIT

BY LYMAN HAFEN

There was once in this town a thing called the Dixie Spirit. These days we would probably call it the St. George Community Spirit. I think it still exists in pockets here and there beneath the red ledges and the black ridges.

However, if you based your perception solely on the local opinion pages, you'd have to admit we've become as stridently polarized in our town as the country has.

Case in point: The Sun Bowl. I've read several opinion pieces questioning the judgment of anyone who thinks saving the Sun Bowl is a good idea. Folks of every stripe are against it. But there's a diverse group who favor saving it.

I'm among them.

If you sit down with someone who believes the Sun Bowl is worth saving, and if you listen with an open mind and with a degree of respect for their opinion, you'll find there's more to it than nostalgia or clinging to the past. The Sun Bowl, sitting in the heart of this community, symbolizes something about the heart of this community that will be diminished when it is demolished and covered over by more buildings and parking lots.

Certainly it does not qualify for protection as a historic structure. Nor is it an architectural gem. But it is more than the concrete hole in the ground that opponents call it. In fact, its quiriness and character are part of what make it worth saving. Every other town has its generic football field and its metal bleachered fair park – one looking just like another. Where will you find in the middle of a town an outdoor stadium as singular as the Sun Bowl? Once it's gone, it's gone.

What replaces it will continue the process of homogenizing St. George into as generic a town as the next. Something of this place's unique soul will be gone.

Then, if you sit down with someone who sincerely believes the Sun Bowl has run its course, and if you listen with an open mind and with respect for their opinion, you'll have to agree that there are compelling reasons to get rid of it. Why put public money into something so dilapidated? It doesn't make economic sense to perpetuate a facility so little used. There are more important considerations the city faces, and higher uses for such prime real estate. The list of persuasive arguments is long – just keep reading the opinion page.

I appreciate and respect those arguments. Yet, I strongly believe the

Sun Bowl should be saved. But only if we can create a plan that refurbishes it to a modern state where it is accessible to and physically comfortable for the general population to enjoy (which will require some seriously ingenious and costly design and construction), and only if a year-round slate of meaningful events and activities can be scheduled there that appeal to a wide cross-section of the public (which will require a solid business plan and effective marketing).

I believe both are possible. Speaking of which, the Zion Lions semipro football team is playing under the Sun Bowl lights on a half-dozen Saturday evenings this spring.

I've been to Fenway Park in Boston nearly a dozen times in the last 25 years, and to Wrigley Field in Chicago twice. Both of those ancient and decrepit public stadiums have been refurbished, modernized and made comfortable and acceptable for a new generation. They were a mess and had run their course, as opponents say of the Sun Bowl. But there was value in not only how those structures contributed to community spirit, but to the uniqueness of their original design, and to where they physically stood in their respective cities.

They carried value that cannot be quantified in dollars. I know St. George is not Boston and the Sun Bowl is not even in the same universe as Fenway Park. But to me the principle is the same.

I believe we owe it to ourselves as a community to investigate ways to keep that precious open space in the center of the city open to the public. It's an amazingly large, yet wonderfully intimate place for outdoor pageantry and spectacle, something we don't have enough of in this digital age with our noses pressed to the screen. It's a rare place where the community can gather and perpetuate old traditions and create new ones, where impressions of what it means to be part of a place sink deep and last a lifetime. It's a place where the community needs to gather to recapture the kind of spirit that made it so great.

Take a drive along Red Hills Parkway during this stunning month of April and stop at a turnout on the red bluff above town. Scan the city from black ridge to black ridge and tell me that unique, green oval in the center of town is a blemish on the city. Imagine that space covered in concrete, buildings and pavement, and tell me we wouldn't have lost something

of the heart of this town.

There's more to it. I don't think we can or should save the Sun Bowl unless those of us who are passionate about it are willing to put our money where our hearts are. Which brings me back to the old Dixie (excuse me, St. George Community) Spirit.

The reason we have the Sun Bowl today is because St. George citizens in the mid-1940s, coming out from under the cloud of World War II, wanted it so badly they donated their personal time, skills, labor, and money to build it. Thanks to the St. George Lions Club, and future-minded folks like Neal Lundberg, not a dime of taxpayer money was spent on the original phase of the Sun Bowl. It was built by the donated labor, materials and contributed cash of everyday citizens, including high school students who leveled the arena floor with hand shovels.

It's the same reason we have a university in St. George today. Once in the 1930s, and again in the 1950s, the school was slated for closure until residents rallied and came up with the private funds and resources to save a public institution. It happened again when public funds were not sufficient to complete the original Dixie Convention Center. The list goes on. The St. George Community Spirit is the can-do spirit that's made this a place folks from all kinds of backgrounds and beliefs have chosen to move to.

I don't have the skill or stamina to run a gunite machine like LeGrand Frei did when he donated several precious work days to build the new Sun Bowl, barely a year after he returned from his last combat mission in the Pacific. But I have a check written, and it's ready to be delivered as soon as I see the plan.

