

Work begins on Paterson's historic Hinchliffe Stadium

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(Photos: Mitsu Yasukawa/NorthJersey.com)

PATERSON — A ground-breaking ceremony on Tuesday kicked off Phase 1 of the Hinchliffe Stadium Rehabilitation project. Work will officially begin after Labor Day and is expected to take about a year.

The stadium, built in 1932, is deemed a national historic landmark because of its status as one of few ballparks still standing from the mid-20th century segregated Negro baseball leagues. The first phase will rehabilitate the stadium's facade along Liberty Street, restore four ticket booths and replace decorative features such as the old terracotta tiles

and metal gates. Crews from **Wu & Associates** will complete the work.

"This is a first step in the right direction," said Brian LoPinto, a co-founder of Friends of Hinchliffe Stadium. LoPinto was among the officials on hand during Tuesday's ceremony.

Slated to cost \$1.5 million, the first phase is part of a more ambitious plan to save the 9,500-seat stadium that will cost between \$30 million and \$35 million, LoPinto said.



General scene of the historic Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson on Aug. 29, 2017. (Photo: Mitsu Yasukawa/NorthJersey.com)

Phase I funds come from a \$300,000 grant from the American Express Foundation, a \$500,000 matching New Jersey Historic Trust grant and \$30,000 from the 1772 Foundation. Paterson has bonded for the remainder of the funds.

Hinchliffe once hosted the Negro League's Black Yankees and New York Cubans. It is best known as the place where the "Silk City Slugger" Larry Doby began his career. In all some 20 future Hall of Famers played at Hinchliffe.

Despite its rich history, the stadium, owned by the Paterson school district since 1963, fell into disuse and disrepair. The district, officials said, was not able to properly maintain the property.



Congressman Bill Pascrell speaks at the ground-breaking ceremony for the historic Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson on Aug. 29, 2017.

It was closed in 1997 after a section of the field began to collapse and was deemed unsafe, said Gianfranco Archimede, Paterson's director of historic preservation. Since then the city and the stadium's friends have been working on a plan to bring back the stadium to its former glory.

"This is the first comprehensive rehabilitation that has taken place since its construction," Archimede said. The wheels of government are slow, he added. To get where they are today took many years of

getting the historic designations it needed and financing in place, Archimede said.

In 2009, Paterson voters approved \$15 million in bonds to pay for the city's share of rehabilitation.

The efforts by 9th District Democratic Congressman Bill Pascrell, provided another key puzzle piece in 2014.



General scene of the historic Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson on Aug. 29, 2017.

Pascrell championed the effort to get Hinchliffe included as part of the Great Falls National Historic Park. Built to overlook the falls, it is the only ball park included within the boundaries of a National Park.

Given the Great Falls' role in this country's industrial revolution, Pascrell said it's proper that Hinchliffe be included as part of that story for "immigrants built this city."

Hinchliffe was built during the darkest days of the Great Depression and initially built to provide a

venue for Paterson's sports teams and other local athletes, Pascrell said.

"It shows the human side of those who came to work in our mills," Pascrell said. "New immigrants still seek the American Dream in this city."

Pascrell and Paterson Mayor Jose Torres said on Tuesday that restoring Hinchliffe is more than just preserving the past, but a bridge to a revitalized city.

About 177,000 visitors visited the Great Falls last year. The hope, the congressman and mayor said, is that a viable stadium might keep those who visit to stay longer and maybe support local businesses.

"Paterson has to become a destination," Pascrell said. "This needs to become an economic engine."

LoPinto said the best way to pay for the work after the first phase is completed, is via a public-private partnership with a private entity. He said the details have to be worked out, but he envisions a private company getting use of the site for sporting or entertainment events in return for funds. The city and schools would also be able to utilize the stadium for a specified number of events.

Working out the details, LoPinto said, "is a matter for the lawyers."

Still they are long way from that date. They've only begun to broach the problem of where all the visitors will park. Archimede said one possible site being considered for parking is the lot on Market Street near the Paterson Museum.

"I am proud to see that after 20 years we're prepared to start Phase 1," Torres said. He said given the extent of deterioration it will do much to stabilize the crumbling structure.



General scene of the historic Hinchliffe Stadium in Paterson on Aug. 29, 2017.

Archimede said the city has as much as \$10 million earmarked for the project, but it was always the city's intent to try and raise "three private dollars for every public dollar spent."

City officials changed course on their financing plans for the reconstruction in June after a Paterson Press article highlighted the poor track record similar programs have had statewide.

Consultants had proposed the creation of a 35-acre Revenue Allocation District (RAD) around Hinchliffe

that would generate funding through various taxes paid by property owners within the area. One of the consultants' written reports said the RAD would be "the primary recommended business structure" for the stadium project.

But the Paterson Press reported that just two municipalities in the state had established RAD districts in the 15 years since the state law was adopted and that neither one was successful.

After the information was published, the mayor said in June the city decided to focus its efforts on the use of \$135 million in state tax credits, rather than the RAD district.

"The state replaced the RAD with the ERG [economic redevelopment growth program]," Torres said at the time, referring to the initiative that created the tax credits.

The consultants the city hired to work on the project are Clark, Caton and Hintz Architects, Retail Development Strategies, and the Archer and Greiner law firm.