

Opinion



The former Springfield City Hospital building in 2024. (The Republican / file photo)

## Former city hospital land offers a playful promise for Springfield | Johnnie R.S. McKnight

Johnnie R.S. McKnight March 12, 2026 9:01 am

When I was a little boy, my grandmother used to take me to visit my great-grandmother Louise. In our family, everyone simply called her “Mother.”

I didn't know her well for long. By the time I was old enough to remember clearly, she had begun to get sick. Eventually she was placed at Springfield City Hospital on State Street. I remember those visits vividly.

At first, we would walk slowly around the property together. My grandmother would hold her mom's arm, steadying her steps. Later, as her health declined, those walks stopped. Most visits were spent by her bedside while my grandmother gently combed and braided Mother's gray-white hair.

And then one day, she was gone.

My grandmother's world seemed to shatter. Mother had been her only parent, her anchor. In the days that followed, my grandmother would tell stories about her childhood, how Mother would send her from North Carolina to Boston during the summers to stay with relatives, the way many Black families did during that era. She'd laugh about being put on the train with a couple of chicken sandwiches wrapped in aluminum foil, a prayer, and the expectation that family on the other end would be waiting.

Years later, when I moved back to Springfield nearly 15 years ago, I couldn't avoid passing that old hospital on State Street. By then, it was quiet, worn down, and slowly falling into disrepair.

Every time I drove by, I thought about Mother, her infectious smile, the stories, and one particular memory that still makes me laugh.

She would sometimes look at me and say to my grandmother, "Betty Lou, you see that boy's big old head? I'm telling you, there's nothing but sense in there. That boy is going to be something one day."

I don't know exactly what she had in mind. But every time I recall that voice, all I can think about is her teasing me about my oversized head.

Those memories came rushing back recently as debate swirled around Springfield over the possibility that the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Hoophall high school basketball tournaments might move to Boston.

Springfield now finds itself at a crossroads. As discussions continue about whether marquee events connected to the Hall of Fame might leave the city for Boston, the real question shouldn't be about blame or bruised egos.

It should be about opportunity. Sitting in the heart of the 11th Hampden District is more than 10 acres of land where the former Springfield City Hospital once stood, an underused site that could become one of the premier youth sports complexes in Massachusetts.

With the right partnership between the city, the state and private investors, Springfield could create a destination capable of hosting major basketball tournaments, youth sporting events and community programming year-round.

For some, the conversation has turned into a political chess match; replaying old grievances, assigning blame and re-litigating past decisions. Others are busy daydreaming about potential new sites or trying to relive old glory days.

But when I hear these conversations, my mind goes somewhere different.

I think about that abandoned hospital site, a space with the potential to become something transformative for Springfield.

Imagine what could be built there with the right vision. A premier indoor sports complex capable of hosting Hoophall-style tournaments and youth basketball showcases. A place where the next generation of athletes – kids from Mason Square, Liberty Heights and neighborhoods across Western Massachusetts – could compete on a big stage.

With such a large parcel of land, the possibilities extend even further. Hotels and hospitality space could be added to the site to accommodate the visitors and families that major tournaments attract. The proximity to two high schools across the street also presents opportunities for shared facilities, practices, community events and youth development programming. When you begin to look at the full scope of the land and the surrounding neighborhood, the opportunities are truly endless.

In other words, a facility like this would not only help keep major basketball events in Springfield, it could help build a sports and tourism destination that strengthens the local economy.

This is not a fantasy. Cities across the country have built sports complexes that drive tourism, youth development, and local business growth.

Springfield can do the same. I understand the frustration some leaders at the Hall of Fame may feel if they believe the city hasn't always supported their vision. I also understand the sense of hurt and betrayal some city officials may feel hearing that marquee events might leave the place where basketball was born.

But if Springfield spends its time pointing fingers, we will miss the opportunity right in front of us. At some point, the question stops being who did what or who should have reacted sooner.

The real question: What solutions are we willing to build together?

The state delegation, the city of Springfield, and leaders at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame all have roles to play. Working together, not apart, is how we ensure the Hall remains anchored in Springfield while building something that benefits the entire community.

Because the residents of Springfield deserve leadership focused not on the past, but on what's possible.

That abandoned hospital site once held some of my family's most painful memories. Yet every time I pass it, I also hear Mother's voice reminding me that potential is always there, even in places people have written off.

Maybe it's time Springfield looked at that land the same way. Not as a relic of what used to be, but as a foundation for what could be next.

Springfield was the birthplace of basketball. With vision and cooperation, it can also be the place where the next generation of the game is built.

*Johnnie R.S. McKnight is a regular contributor.*