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Professional Sports in Hampton Roads

Region Works to Attract Franchise

Area Makes "Short List" for Existing Team's Move

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By Harry Minium, The Virginian-Pilot

A Major League Baseball consultant has told area leaders that Hampton Roads is on "a short list" of regions being considered as relocation sites for existing teams, said James L. Eason, president of the Hampton Roads Partnership.

Regional and state officials have stepped up their efforts to recruit a baseball team in recent months in part because of the comment by Corey Busch, former executive vice president of the San Francisco Giants and now a Major League Baseball consultant.

Eason said Gov. Jim Gilmore has appointed State Secretary of Commerce Barry DuVal, the former mayor of Newport News, as his point man on baseball. DuVal has met with Major League Baseball officials in New York as recently as three weeks ago and was in San Francisco on Wednesday to have dinner with Busch.

According to Eason, Gilmore has also met at least twice with Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig to press Virginia's case. Hampton Roads is the nation's largest metropolitan area and Virginia is the largest state without a major sports franchise.

"I think the fact that the governor has asked Barry DuVal to get involved shows this is important" to him, Eason said.

The Hampton Roads Partnership, an influential group of political, civic and business leaders, has been quietly working to land a Major League Baseball franchise for two years.

Rick Horrow, a Miami-based consultant working for the partnership, has also met with Selig and other officials to lobby for Hampton Roads.

Major League Baseball hired Busch last summer to assess about 10 markets that are seeking baseball teams. He has visited Hampton Roads twice in the past 10 months, and Eason said Busch was impressed by his first visit on Sept. 7.

"He communicated to us that it was a good visit, that we had shown well and that we would remain on their list," said Eason, the former Hampton mayor. "As he described it, we were on the short list, though he didn't say how short the list is."

Northern Virginia has long been considered the favorite to land a relocated franchise. Other strong candidates include Las Vegas; Charlotte, N.C.; Sacramento, Calif.; San Jose, Calif.; and Nashville, Tenn.

Although fundamentally opposed to franchise relocation, Selig has said as many as five teams might have to move. The Montreal Expos, Minnesota, Florida, Tampa Bay and Oakland are the ones most often discussed.

Northern Virginia's strength as a market is generally acknowledged, but it has a major problem in Baltimore Orioles owner Peter Angelos. He has been fighting to keep a second franchise out of the Washington-Baltimore area. Angelos does not own territorial rights in Northern Virginia, but baseball officials fear he would sue if a team relocates too close to Baltimore.

Busch visited Hampton Roads a second time in January and asked the partnership to commission a study to determine if the region has enough corporate backing to support a major league franchise.

With nearly 1.6 million residents, Hampton Roads is viewed as having the population to sustain a major league franchise. However, the relative dearth of major corporations has been seen as a major weakness.

The study, conducted by the Washington firm of Brailsford and Dunlavey, estimated that a Major League Baseball franchise would generate \$38 million yearly from local corporations. That would include \$11.3 million from advertising, \$10.8 million from club seating and \$5.2 million from luxury suites.

Eason said about 60 corporations were contacted, including some in the Richmond area.

"The results were good; they exceeded my expectations," Eason said.

Eason said the partnership has also sought input from HOK Sports, the nation's most well-known stadium designer, and Turner Construction, which has built most of the newer Major League Baseball stadiums.

They estimate it would cost \$300 million to build a 40,000-seat baseball stadium. Harbor Park, which seats 12,000, could be enlarged quickly to seat about 22,000 to serve as a temporary home. However, Eason said Harbor Park can't be expanded to seat 40,000 so it could not become a permanent home.

Whether a new site downtown or a site elsewhere in the region would work best "isn't a question for the partnership. I think that would be a question for the region and the team owner," Eason said.

Eason has generally been cautious when asked about the region's hopes for landing a baseball team, citing all the fanfare that surrounded a failed 1997 effort to acquire a National Hockey League franchise that would have been known as the Hampton Roads Rhinos.

But he has gradually become bullish.

"This is something we deliberately haven't made a big public splash about," he said. "I'm sensitive to the Rhinos situation. We don't want to get everybody all fired up and have it collapse."

But he added: "We really do believe there's an opportunity here. We have a lot of things going for us. Every other market has problems. We have a strong market without another team here. Charlotte has two (major sports) teams and arena problems. I'm not sure Northern Virginia will get past the objections of the Orioles.

"We have a real chance."

Eason said that if the region is unsuccessful in landing Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association is the region's next best option.

Norfolk has taken preliminary steps toward a possible run at an NBA franchise bid by hiring a consultant to decide which downtown site is best suited for an arena.

Eason said the Brailsford and Dunlavey report also asked if corporations would support an NBA team with the same dollars with which they would support major league baseball.

"Nearly all of them said yes," Eason said.

Norfolk Tides general manager Dave Rosenfield, who has spent nearly five decades in baseball, said he was aware of the partnership's effort.

"I think it is marvelous that the leaders of the greater Hampton Roads area are working together to do something for the area," he said. But, he added, Northern Virginia still is the area "likely to be first in line for a relocated franchise."