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## Time for City, Chargers to Talk Stadium

**Team Not Planning to Leave,  
But Qualcomm Won't Last Forever**

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By Nick Canepa

The possibility of the Chargers picking up and moving to Los Angeles or somewhere else remains just that -- a possibility.

While very much real, such talk also is premature.

But it's a story, because there's a chance this city could lose an NFL franchise that has been in residence for more than 40 years, and there's something terribly bush league about a town losing an NFL team.

It's a story because next year's Super Bowl in Qualcomm Stadium in all probability will be the last one held in a building that no longer meets Super Bowl standards. The economic impact to the city of the 1998 Super Bowl at Qualcomm was estimated at \$295 million, according to the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers.

It's a story because the two sides, the Chargers and City Hall, have barely talked, and haven't talked about the stadium issue per se. And the stadium is the issue.

The Chargers can and will continue to play in Qualcomm, but they aren't going to play in the place forever, and it's difficult to blame them. They eventually will need a new place. How long they will continue with Qualcomm as their home after the 2003 season, when a hole in their lease with the city allows them to seek a new address, is the burning question. That, and can something, anything, get done in a town that voted in a downtown ballpark and still hemorrhaged getting it built?

Time is the key. And those who file nuisance lawsuits knowing they can't win, know this. If they can drag it out long enough with nothing getting done, there is a real possibility a team could leave.

Chargers president Dean Spanos is loath to discuss this matter publicly, primarily because the problem isn't his problem. He is a tenant. He really doesn't have to do anything and insists he has done nothing involving a future move to Los Angeles, as rumored. NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue will say only that the Los Angeles situation must be addressed in the future and is not inclined to discuss the matter at the present time.

"I have no agenda; I've got nothing to hide," Spanos says. "I haven't talked to anybody about anything in L.A., other than the possibility of moving our training camp to that area (either Cal State Dominguez Hills or UC Irvine). I don't want to leave here. And there's no drop-dead date."

Rumors aside, the odds of the Chargers leaving town before January 2004 are way beyond remote. They can, however, leave anytime after that. If another town wants the Chargers, it will call Spanos. And if that day dawns, the team will be through dealing with this city and will leave. Which is why it's important something be done before that sunrise.

Mayor Dick Murphy also won't openly discuss the situation. Attempts to get the mayor to comment resulted in this two-sentence statement through his press secretary:

"Mayor Dick Murphy and San Diego Chargers president Dean Spanos have met several times. Nothing definite has been agreed upon, other than both want the Chargers to remain in San Diego."

From what I can gather, those "several meetings" were social, not business. There was one shortly after Murphy was elected, in which the stadium issue and the controversial ticket guarantee were not discussed. They also met recently over breakfast during Super Bowl week in New Orleans, where Spanos emphasized he wanted the team to remain in San Diego and Murphy agreed, adding that nothing could be done until construction resumed on the downtown ballpark.

Well, construction has resumed. Now what do these people plan to do?

"I'm not sure what to think," says county supervisor Ron Roberts, who lost the mayoral race to Murphy in 2000. "There basically has been no contact between the city and the Chargers for two years. I've brought it up in discussions. I'm concerned. I'm real concerned. It's like everybody's ignoring it."

"This needs to be discussed. I understand that nobody expects the Chargers to go much longer in the stadium. But there's almost a resignation that there's nothing we can do. It seems to me that they should be having discussions. I understand the Chargers and the NFL will invest substantial dollars toward a new stadium project. The city is in the driver's seat."

Nothing is going to get done unless there is dialogue. And I don't know if it's up to the Chargers to initiate it. The Chargers did not come up with the ticket guarantee. The city did. The Chargers did not allow the stadium to run down. The city did.

The Chargers, of course, have refused to renegotiate the ill-advised ticket guarantee, which is incendiary language for what is actually a sliding rent scale that nevertheless guarantees the Chargers revenue equivalent to the sale of 60,000 general-admission seats per game.

More than once, Spanos has said, "a deal is a deal," but some politicians who have come along since that agreement was made -- and some who were there at the time -- have drawn a line between themselves and the franchise.

Backing ballparks and stadiums has not been a vote-getter lately. But the ticket guarantee is something that no doubt would have to be settled once and for all before City Hall looked into a new stadium.

"I'm hoping there is a way to turn this into a win-win situation for both sides," Roberts says. "Get us out of that ticket guarantee and into something long-term."

There has been talk that the Chargers could look at another city in the area, possibly in the North County, but land for such a project there is scarce.

As it is, it's almost impossible for an NFL stadium to be built entirely by private funds.

"The only place where it's close is in Washington, D.C., but the land, infrastructure and roadways were paid for by the public," says Chris Dunlavey, president of Brailsford and Dunlavey, a Washington firm that does planning and project management work for stadiums. "It's a tough nut to crack."

So, when you hear of somebody building the Chargers a privately funded stadium in Los Angeles, you wonder how it can be done. The Chargers are not going to give up control of the team. If they move to another city, they're going to want a hefty share of the revenue generated by the new stadium. What's in it for the builder?

"Building a stadium through private funds and leasing it to the Chargers is not an economic model that works," Dunlavey says. "It's basically 10 dates a year. Other than football, there's not much use for a football stadium, unless it's a dome, and there's not much more in a dome, either."

Dunlavey doesn't see additional Super Bowls being played in Qualcomm Stadium.

"I'm sure that's right," he says. "It's updated, but it's still an obsolete facility. It may be up to code, but it doesn't have what modern stadiums are supposed to have."

So there you have it. This is a serious situation being discussed at black-tie parties, social mixes, in saloons, on construction sites and in kitchens. Everywhere but where it should be discussed. It is real. It is out there. Now it's up to the people who can get something done to sit down and talk, political climate be damned. When is the political climate ever right around here?

If Mayor Murphy wants to lose an NFL franchise while he's on the bridge, that will be his legacy.

If not, Mr. Mayor, the Chargers' number is (858) 874-4500. In San Diego.

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