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Hornets List Top Concerns: Red Ink and Naming Rights

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By Harry Minium, The Virginian-Pilot

The Charlotte Hornets have given the city of Norfolk and Hampton Roads Partnership a list of issues they say must be addressed before the NBA team would move to Hampton Roads.

Officials say the No. 1 concern is the financial losses the team would expect in its first two seasons in Hampton Roads.

Because the Hornets would have to play at Scope (10,258 seats) or Old Dominion's Constant Convocation Center (8,600) while awaiting the construction of a \$228 million, 18,500-seat downtown arena, they would lose at least \$15 million per season.

Discussions on that and other topics between local officials and Hornets ownership continued through the holidays, said Chris Dunlavey, president of Brailsford and Dunlavey, a Washington firm that is working for the city.

"They have outlined a series of points they would like the community to address," Dunlavey said of the Hornets. "We are working on responses to those points."

New Orleans, meanwhile, has emerged as a surprisingly strong relocation candidate for the Hornets. While that area is smaller and poorer than Hampton Roads and already has a major sports team in the NFL's Saints, it has an arena with 44 suites and 19,500 seats ready to move into, rent-free.

Moreover, the city may offer the Hornets financial incentives to relocate there that Norfolk and Louisville can't match.

Former Atlanta Hawks coach Mike Fratello, who is close with Hornets minority owner Ray Wooldridge, recently predicted on national TV that the Hornets would bypass both Norfolk and Louisville and relocate to New Orleans.

Privately, local officials consider New Orleans to be Hampton Roads' most formidable opposition.

Other issues the Hornets raised in Hampton Roads include the unfinished work on a naming-rights deal and concerns about corporate support for an NBA team. How the city will answer the questions isn't known, although officials hope to announce a naming-rights deal by mid-January.

Norfolk Mayor Paul D. Fraim said he was unaware of the list from the Hornets but said the top two points - an interim facility and a naming-rights deal - aren't surprising.

"The two main hurdles are the ones that have been there from the beginning," he said.

The Hornets had set Jan. 1 as their deadline to decide where they will move. That has now been set back several weeks by delays in both Norfolk and Louisville in getting arena-finance deals on the table.

Louisville has a \$100 million naming-rights deal but has yet to announce an arena-finance plan. However, Louisville Mayor Dave Armstrong said Wednesday that he has given a plan to the Hornets and the University of Louisville, which he hopes also will use a downtown arena. He says he won't make that plan public until the Hornets and university have responded.

Norfolk has given the Hornets the outlines of an arena-finance plan but can't fill in the details until it concludes a naming-rights deal.

Anaheim, Calif., and St. Louis, cities that have existing arenas with NHL teams as tenants, have also been listed among the team's relocation candidates.

Hornets players acknowledged to the Charlotte Observer earlier this week that the talk about moving, and the team's poor attendance, have had an effect on their record, 13-17 entering tonight's game with Golden State in Charlotte.

"When you have a whole franchise deciding whether they're going to stay or go, it definitely has an effect on the players," guard Baron Davis told the newspaper. "Everyone wants to feel at home here, and we don't know if we're going to be here or not."

"You feel you're supported," he said of the team's poor home attendance, which is second-to-last in the NBA. "If you feel you're not supported, your mind just wanders. You're just not as focused as you should be."

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