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Area Leaders Agree to Hire Consultant to Study Arena

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By Harry Minium, Staff Writer

Area political leaders have embraced a compromise proposed by Virginia Beach on hiring a consultant to study a 20,000-seat sports arena.

Virginia Beach Mayor Meyera E. Oberndorf suggested at Friday's Mayors and Chairs meeting that the consultant be hired through the soon-to-be-formed Hampton Roads Partnership. The proposal was approved unanimously, ending a deadlock that had stalled the arena issue for more than three months.

The Mayors and Chairs representatives - 10 mayors and five chairs of county boards of supervisors - remained divided after 20 minutes of debate at Friday's meeting at the restaurant in the Harbor Park baseball stadium.

Norfolk Mayor Paul D. Fraim proposed a compromise that included putting off the issue of site selection until later. Then Oberndorf stood and suggested using the Hampton Roads Partnership. Within 10 minutes, an agreement was forged.

The Hampton Roads Partnership is in its infancy and will hold its first organizational meeting May 15. The partnership is to include the 15 mayors and chairs, the presidents of six universities and colleges, four senior military commanders and about 30 of the region's top business leaders.

With 1.6 million residents, Hampton Roads is the nation's largest metropolitan area without a major sports franchise. Regional leaders envision the proposed 20,000-seat arena as a future home for an NBA or NHL team.

Fraim said a consultant should be hired by the end of May. The consultant, expected to cost about \$ 6,000 per month for up to two years, will be paid by a combination of city, county and private funds.

The consultant is expected to:

Determine whether the region's business community would purchase enough luxury boxes and season tickets to make an arena feasible.

Recommend a site and funding mechanism.

Find out whether Hampton Roads can attract an NBA or NHL franchise.

The Hampton Roads Partnership is being formed in part to help foster regional cooperation, and a spirit of cooperation was evident at Friday's meeting.

Oberndorf left immediately after the meeting and was unavailable for comment, but Arthur L. Collins, executive director of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, said: "She deserves a lot of credit for what happened today."

Said Fraim: "I think it strengthens the proposal because we have the best of both worlds. We have a legal entity that includes all the jurisdictions as well as the very most senior members of our business establishment working on this proposal."

Chesapeake Mayor William E. Ward, who chaired Friday's meeting, said his city will accept Oberndorf's proposal. The governing bodies in Virginia Beach and Isle of Wight also must still approve the compromise.

"If Meyera recommended it, I'm sure we'll get behind the mayor," said Virginia Beach Vice Mayor Will Sessoms Jr. "This is just fantastic. This is great news."

Some details remain to be worked out, such as how the consultant will be chosen. Collins said it's likely that a committee within the partnership will be formed to choose a consultant and oversee the study.

The subcommittee could be selected by the partnership's 15-person executive committee, which is to be named May 15. Oberndorf and Fraim will be on the executive committee.

Three consultants names have surfaced as potential favorites:

Rick Horrow, a Miami-based consultant on retainer to the NFL who conceived a plan in Oklahoma City that combined an arena with other projects, including a museum and convention center. The Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce is boosting Horrow.

Bob Walsh, a Seattle-based consultant who is well-connected with the NBA. He helped bring the NCAA basketball Final Four to Seattle twice and led Vancouver's successful bid to land an NBA team. He did a study last year for Norfolk.

Chris Dunlavey, a Washington-based consultant with Brailsford and Dunlavey, which wrote two reports for the Sports Authority of Hampton Roads on a regional arena.