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## **BB&T Ballpark Is Reshaping Charlotte Knights Franchise**

By Erik Spanburg

The Charlotte Knights lose money, rank last in the league in attendance and come as an afterthought to most sports fans around town. A sure sign of the struggles: The team owner talks about the stress of the past few years posing a health threat to his top team executive.

He is kidding. Sort of.

Don Beaver, the Knights' owner, offers that thought on a recent summer day uptown, a day when he and Chief Operating Officer Dan Rajkowski and other Knights staffers hosted a crew of 300 people for a stadium tour. Reporters, sponsors, season-ticket holders and plenty of potential customers received invites to the first extensive tour of the Third Ward construction site that soon will be home to Beaver's minor-league franchise.

Rajkowski happens upon a display of commemorative bricks along the unfinished concourse — bricks fans can have engraved and view outside the stadium entry. Beaver walks up and glances at the sample brick, engraved with Rajkowski's name on it. Sort of like a tombstone.

"It's a good thing that this is not in memory of Dan Rajkowski," Beaver tells the reporters. "This ballpark about took him down."

Rajkowski says, "About did."

Both men laugh, a nod to the glory days they believe are right around the corner.

In some ways, BB&T Ballpark, the \$54 million uptown stadium now under construction, is smaller than the AAA baseball franchise's current home across the state line in Fort Mill. That stadium has 10,000 fixed seats and sits on a sprawling site with ample room for parking and any expansion needed. Uptown, the new ballpark calls an 8.6-acre piece of land home, a site tight

enough to require some shoehorning by architects to fit the stadium into the Mecklenburg County-owned property.

The new ballpark will have 1,200 fewer fixed seats. Capacity reaches 10,000 only after counting outfield bleachers, grass berms and a standing-room-only porch above right field. But everything else, starting with attendance, concessions sales and corporate sponsorships, looks to be much bigger. The reason: location. And the 59,045 bricks — not the commemorative ones — to be used as part of a traditional baseball setting, a much more appealing prospect than the concrete bunker the team now calls home.

Rajkowski and consultants hired by the team estimate the move back to Charlotte will triple the Knights' annual revenue. Minor-league baseball left for Fort Mill in 1990 and, when BB&T Ballpark opens next year, it will return to Charlotte for the first time in a quarter of a century.

Sales, now in the \$3.5 million range, will jump to \$10 million to \$12 million, Rajkowski predicts.

Already, BB&T Corp. has committed to a long-term but unspecified naming-rights deal, likely in the range of \$500,000 to \$1 million per year, based on recent industry benchmarks. Carolinas HealthCare System, Piedmont Natural Gas Co. Inc. and Chick-fil-A also have signed new deals with the team for advertising, tickets and other rights at the new stadium.

Corporate buyers have begun snapping up some of the 975 club seats and 22 suites at the new stadium, where uptown skyline views from the seats differ just a bit from the empty fields surrounding the Fort Mill ballpark. While suites at the current stadium lease for less than \$20,000 on the high end, the going rate uptown starts at \$15,000 and runs as high as \$50,000. The suites require seven- and 10-year commitments.

And, while the team struggles to fill its suites now, 13 of the 17 full-season suites uptown have already been taken. An additional five suites will be held for nightly, per-game rentals to attract one-off corporate outings and other group events.

The stadium offers better views of the field for all fans. In Fort Mill, the highest seats extend 34 rows deep; uptown, it's 21 rows. Rajkowski says the team wants to keep ticket prices in the range of the current \$9 to \$15, but that comes with a caveat. In Fort Mill, a \$15 ticket is top of the line. At the uptown stadium, club seats sell for \$21 and \$41 per game and require a five-year, full-season contract. They include access to private, air-conditioned lounges and, for some suite and club-seat buyers, parking next door at the Mint Street deck.

All of the benefits and new wrinkles, from the setting to the anticipated upgrades in catering and other concessions, bring a few headaches.

"It's a big shift for a team," says Bill Mykins, head of the venue group for sports and entertainment at Washington project-management firm Brailsford & Dunlavey. Mykins, whose experience includes helping the city of Washington with Nationals Park and conducting analysis of several minor-league markets, says when a franchise moves to a new venue and offers "upgraded amenities and more of them, the expectation for the level of service is higher. You have to hire additional staff, and you have to develop a good training program."

Some of that is already under way. In December, the Knights hired Scotty Brown as general manager of baseball operations, promoting Rajkowski, the former general manager, to COO. Brown's arrival allows Rajkowski to focus most of his attention on the construction site, new ballpark sales and gearing up to move the staff early next year.

Early in 2013, the team hired two premium-seat salespeople, jobs that have been all but unnecessary in Fort Mill. Soon after the BB&T groundbreaking in September, a director of ticket sales and hospitality was added. And the Knights opened an uptown office at Packard Place.

The recent stadium tour led by Beaver and Rajkowski will become a monthly occurrence, aimed at getting potential buyers excited enough to commit to season tickets.

Brown, the general manager, says the team will hire 10 to 12 employees during the upcoming off-season. The Knights have 24 on staff now. Because the stadium will be ready for use by January, the Knights will have more lead time to train and figure out the best ways to handle concessions and other logistics, Brown adds.

Already, Knights executives have begun asking other teams for advice on moving to a new stadium and training employees. Brown says the team is studying a range of options and will likely use a combination of online and in-person training programs.

“You can’t take your old operation and move it into a new ballpark and think it can succeed,” says Randy Mobley, president of the International League, the 14-club league that includes the Knights. “You’ve got to upgrade your staffing and everything you do.”

Mobley says he tells the Knights and other teams to be careful not to overprice tickets and concessions in new ballparks and to make sure the service meets expectations. Several weeks ago, Mobley, who has been pushing for a new Knights stadium since Beaver bought the team in 1997, took a private tour and got a glimpse of what’s in store for the Knights and the International League next season.

As gratifying as it is for the league, Mobley says it means the most to see Beaver and Rajkowski, who arrived in 2005, heading for home.

“We make no secret about it, (Don Beaver) has taken his lumps,” Mobley says. “You get up some mornings and think, has he had enough? And what do you do if the owner gives up? Fighting through everything — this has the potential to be better than any we have.”

## **BB&T Ballpark**

Some of the key details behind the new baseball stadium that will open in Third Ward in April 2014:

**Architects:** Ballpark Design Associates and Odell

**Contractors:** Barton Malow, Rodgers, RJ Leeper

**Capacity:** 10,000

**Cost:** \$54 million

**Public investment:** \$16 million combined from city and county, plus \$1-per-year lease on \$24 million county-owned site

**Suites:** 22

**Club seats:** 975

**Fixed seats:** 8,800

**Site:** 8.6 acres

**Total number of bricks:** 59,045

**Concrete:** 10,000 yards

**Electrical wiring:** 12 miles

**Opens:** April 2014