

Portland duo wants the city and Major League Baseball to strike a courtship to lure a team westward

Baseball Rose Quarter rendering

Barry Smith produced this Google Maps image showing what a potential baseball ballpark replicated after Pittsburgh's PNC Park, would look like in the Rose Quarter (*Google Maps rendering produced by Barry Smith*)

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on October 23, 2013 at 5:34 PM, updated October 24, 2013 at 10:55 AM

"Until Oakland and Tampa have solutions...Portland is still an option. I'll go to my grave with that." Lynn Lashbrook

(Correction appended)

They don't own the land, they don't have the cash, and they don't have a prospective team. But a Portland duo is attempting to drum up interest in bringing Major League Baseball to the Rose Quarter.

Lynn Lashbrook and **Barry Smith** believe the MLB needs Portland, whether league officials know it or not, and that the Rose Quarter is an ideal location for one of the sport's 30 franchises.

Specifically, they say Portland's Veterans Memorial Coliseum is the best site for a major league ballpark. Lashbrook called the city-owned property a "very practical and logical location for a ballpark."

"It'd be an unbelievable park," he said.

The ballpark would have to be intimate by league standards to fit on that location, they say, roughly 38,000 seats.

The Portland Business Journal first reported the pair was having informal discussions within City Hall.

Lashbrook, president of **Sports Management Worldwide** Inc., and Smith, a Portland architect, blame city officials for prematurely leaking the story in an attempt to kick the plan to the curb.

Dana Haynes, Mayor Charlie Hales' spokesman, confirmed there have been "loose discussions" with Lashbrook's group.

"This comes up from time to time, and of course we're interested in hearing more," Haynes said via email, noting that discussions about bringing baseball to Portland date back to Vera Katz's administration in the early 2000s.

But he characterized the discussions as being "on a low, low boil" and added that the mayor and his staff "don't expect much to come from them."

A MLB spokesman said league executives weren't aware of any Portland group contacting them regarding moving a franchise to the Northwest. The league hasn't looked at Portland since the Montreal Expos moved to Washington in 2005.

Lashbrook and Smith describe **Memorial Coliseum**, in Portland's Rose Quarter District next to the **recently renamed Moda Center**, as "obsolete" and a "major liability" to the city. Under their plan, the city wouldn't be asked to offer up much financially, other than the property.

Lashbrook, who was involved in an effort to lure the Expos to Portland a decade ago, said a 2003 financing plan to dedicate \$150 million in income taxes generated by the franchise toward stadium construction is still available.

Lashbrook said the city doesn't need, and shouldn't expect, a local ownership group. They want the MLB to take an interest in Portland.

The city shelved a **\$31 million plan to renovate the historic Memorial Coliseum** in December. In 2009, another plan to demolish the arena and build a minor league baseball ballpark was thwarted by supporters of the building. That was when city leaders were looking for a place to put the Class AAA Portland Beavers; the Beavers vacated what would become Jeld-Wen Field as part of Portland's push to win a Major League Soccer franchise.

Poor attendance at both Oakland Athletics and Tampa Bay Ray home games has fueled speculation in some circles that either of those franchises could potentially be on the move in the near future.

"Until Oakland and Tampa have solutions, whether they build a stadium or they move, Portland is still an option," Lashbrook said. "I'll go to my grave with that."

Previous rumors centered on the U.S. Postal Service facility in Northwest Portland or the Portland Public Schools headquarters across North Broadway and Weilder from the Rose Quarter as potential sites for a ballpark. Lashbrook and Smith say the Coliseum is the best location.

The Coliseum was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2009, a step advocated by architects to ensure the arena couldn't be razed without a long, costly fight, but Smith said he "doesn't see any reason to save the building."

"We have a great piece of property with the entire infrastructure in place that's owned by the city that needs a new life," Smith said.

Even a speculative proposal got the attention of Brian Libby, an **architecture writer** and co-founder of the Friends of the Memorial Coliseum. "To parachute in and start swinging around a wrecking ball at a nationally registered landmark is not very Portland," Libby said.

Libby predicted strong opposition to any plan to demolish the arena.

City leaders plan to resume conversations about **what to do with the Rose Quarter**, and the coliseum, next year.

In an email, city Office of Management and Finance officials confirmed the timeline calls for a June 2014 return to City Council "with some options that take into consideration the larger issues in the Rose Quarter District."

Smith and Lashbrook believe the ballpark will serve as the catalyst for accelerated development, and bringing more

people more often, to the Rose Quarter.

Using Pittsburgh's PNC Park as a model, Smith copied and pasted the ballpark onto Google Maps to get a sense of what was possible there.

Smith's concept, admittedly premature, would include part of the structure spanning North Interstate Avenue to connect to the waterfront. They envision the ballpark plan helping extend the East Bank Esplanade north of the Rose Quarter

Lashbrook said he first started looking at reviving a plan to attract Major League Baseball last summer after fielding interested calls in response to an article in The Oregonian **about minor league baseball's return to the metro area.**

Earlier this year, Lashbrook and Smith were able to convince two executives with a national sport's facility planning firm that helps shepherd new facilities through financing and development to take a detour to Portland to check out the site.

Bill Mykins, a vice-president with **Brailsford & Dunlavey**, confirmed he and a colleague specifically traveled to Portland to check out Lashbrook's plan. They took the MAX from downtown Portland to the Rose Quarter exit and surveyed the area.

"It's an awesome site," Mykins said, citing the access to mass transit, Interstate 5 and downtown. "I think there's enough land there to make it fit."

Mykin participated in a feasibility study that examined the possibility of luring the Expos to D.C. and also worked to plan the Nationals' ballpark there, so he's familiar with the process.

He said these projects are a three-legged stool: there must be the demand for the project, it's got to be financially feasible, and there must be sufficient political will to make it happen.

Right now the group hasn't formally addressed any of those three steps.

"It's a major undertaking," he said.

In terms of getting attention from the league, the timing really couldn't be much worse

Game one of the World Series starts Wednesday, and Bud Selig, the long-time MLB commissioner, is retiring after the 2014 season.

MLB officials said they didn't expect any discussions about franchises relocating to come up at the league's annual winter meetings which start after the World Series wraps up.

(Bud Selig announced plans to retire after the 2014 season last month. An earlier version of this story said he is retiring this year)

-- Andrew Theen

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