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## MLB Enthusiasts Make Another Pitch

Could new plan for a Rose Quarter stadium entice A's or another club?

By Kerry Eggers



by: COURTESY OF BARRY SMITH - An architect's rendering shows how a 38,000-seat Major League Baseball stadium might fit into the Rose Quarter.

There's a buzz throughout major-league baseball about Montreal regaining the franchise it lost when the Expos moved to Washington in 2005. Tampa — where the Rays have an unsettled stadium situation — seems the logical choice to move north of the border.

Then there is the situation with the Oakland A's, whose lease at the Oakland Coliseum expires after next season. The A's are seeking a 10-year extension with major improvements to the multi-use facility, which is also home to the NFL's Raiders, who want a new football-only stadium built at the same site.

Were Oakland and Alameda County negotiators to agree to an extension with the A's, it would be counterproductive to the Raiders' mission. The A's have made overtures about a move to San

Jose, "but the A's are not going to get a new ballpark for years and years," San Jose Mercury News columnist Mark Purdy writes.

There is also a Coliseum City project proposal for redevelopment of the 850 acres in and around the Oakland Coliseum to create new homes for the Raiders, Athletics and Golden State Warriors. There is an estimated \$900 million price tag on the project, however, of which backers are now looking for alternatives.

It's a political and financial quagmire, and Lynn Lashbrook and Barry Smith say they have a solution.

Move the A's to Portland.

Lashbrook was one of the drivers for the Oregon Baseball Campaign that sought relocation of the Expos to Portland in 2003. The group spearheaded passage of House Bill 3606, which would allocate \$150 million in funds tied to income tax revenue from MLB players to construction of a new stadium.

The Expos spurned Portland for the nation's capital, moving to Washington in 2005 and becoming the Nationals. Lashbrook, a sports agent and president of Sports Management Worldwide, and Smith, a Portland architect, want the A's to take a look at Portland.

"We're just an owner away from changing the political paradigm here," says Lashbrook, 65.

And a stadium, of course.

The A's, meanwhile, are not commenting on their situation.

"Ownership has been really consistent with that," says Bob Rose, the club's director of public relations. "They have said, 'We remain committed to staying in the Bay Area.' "

Well, what are they supposed to say?

**With Providence Park now a soccer-only facility** used by the Timbers, the largest baseball stadium in the Portland area is the 4,500-seat Hillsboro Stadium, home of the Class A Hops.

Lack of a stadium is the biggest impediment to the ambition of Lashbrook and others, because there are a lot of positives to bringing major-league baseball here.

Portland (600,000) is the largest U.S. city with only one of the four major pro leagues. It's the nation's 22nd-largest TV market and the 24th-largest metropolitan area (2.3 million).

"The two places I would look at (for expansion or franchise moves) are Nashville and Portland," says Kevin Towers, a Medford native who serves as general manager of the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Lashbrook and Smith believe a suitable site for a new ballpark is the land upon which Memorial Coliseum sits in the Rose Quarter, next to the Moda Center. Smith contends a 38,000-seat stadium could be built there for a cost of about \$300 million, or perhaps \$400 million with a retractable roof.

"With our summers, I don't think we need a roof," Lashbrook says.

That, of course, is a debate for further down the road.

More importantly, Smith believes the stadium project could be done without public money. He figures in the \$150 million from the house bill, with \$110 million coming from lease of the city-owned land to the team owner. The additional \$40 million, Smith says, would come from a "snack tax" through concessions at the park.

Several years ago, the city seriously considered subsidizing construction of a minor-league park there to house the Triple-A Beavers. For a while, it appeared the Blazers were behind the project, before they decided they weren't. The idea died, and the aging coliseum still sits at the site, the home of hockey's Winterhawks and little else.

Over the past year, Lashbrook and Smith have revisited the issue and a potential spot to build a new stadium. They initially looked at the school district site across NE Broadway. Then they came into contact with two executives with Brailsford & Dunlavey program management team of Washington, D.C.

President Chris Dunlavey and Bill Mykins, a vice president, were part of the firm that renovated RFK Stadium for use by the Nationals from 2005-07, then built the new Nationals Park that opened in 2007. At the invitation of Lashbrook and Smith, Dunlavey and Mykins visited Portland last year to check out the scene and offer advice. They first looked at the Blanchard Education Service Center site, then went to the Rose Quarter.

“Mykins told us, ‘That’s your site,’ ” Lashbrook says.

There was a lot to like, Mykins says.

“Portland is a great city, and the (Rose Quarter) site is promising,” Mykins says. “The proximity to the arena is kind of exciting. The location next to the interstate, with mass transit already in place, is excellent for access. If you had the park oriented north, you’d have views of down the (Willamette) river. It’s a fairly compact site, but with enough room to make it work.”

Another positive is that the city of Portland owns the site.

“A large part of the project is assembling the land,” Mykins says. “In Washington, we had to acquire a lot of property through eminent domain. There was a lot of utility relocation that had to happen. If it’s city-owned land, that helps reduce the cost.”

Mykins says the “biggest issue” in Portland is the coliseum.

“A lot of folks are passionate about keeping it,” he says.

Especially the Winterhawks — they are pushing for a \$36-million renovation — and military veterans, who want to maintain and enhance a memorial wall alongside the coliseum.

“That’s not a problem at all,” Lashbrook offers. “Let’s call the new facility ‘Veterans Memorial Stadium.’ What they have now is embarrassing.”

Nationals Park was built at a cost of \$611 million. The most recent stadium project in the majors is the Atlanta Braves’ new 42,000-seat park, to be built north of the city at an estimated cost of \$672 million and ready for the 2017 season. In both cases, however, the purchase of land is a major part of the price tag.

“Typically, for these things to work, there is some sort of public-private partnership,” Mykins says. “With the new Atlanta park, the county is putting up somewhere around \$450 million, and the Braves are coming up with the rest. It will be a mixed-use facility on 60 acres with transportation improvements necessary, so it’s a different model than Portland.”

Could a stadium be built here for \$300 million?

“It seems like that would be tight,” Mykins says. “It just depends on what that would include.”

Smith says his model is based on Pittsburgh’s 38,496-seat PNC Park, which opened in 2001 at a cost of \$216 million. He says the exorbitant prices on many modern-day stadiums are jacked up by land acquisition.

“The (Rose Quarter) land is one of the most valuable pieces of property in the city, worth hundreds of millions,” says Smith, 55, a Bridgewater, N.J., native who has lived in Portland since 1989 and started his architecture practice in 1993. “You have the land and the infrastructure. That’s a \$250-to-\$400 million headstart.

“I think \$300 million ought to be able to build a stadium. Without a roof, it’s not going to cost \$400 million.”

**Expansion is not in major league baseball’s plans**, though that could change after commissioner Bud Selig’s retirement following this season. There are currently 30 teams, and 32

teams would make some sense in regards to scheduling. For now, though, the plan is to stick with 30.

That leaves relocation as Portland's best chance to get a team. Prior to the Expos' arrival in Washington, the last move of a franchise was when the Washington Senators went to Arlington, Texas, in 1972. A stadium was in place. Originally a minor league park called Turnpike Stadium, the name was changed to Arlington Stadium and capacity was nearly doubled when the club became the Rangers.

When the Oregon Baseball Campaign targeted the Expos more than a decade ago, Providence Park (then called PGE Park) was a suitable temporary franchise. That is no longer an alternative.

"The No. 1 problem — and it's not the only problem — is the lack of a temporary facility," says Portlander David Kahn, who with Lashbrook spearheaded the OBC campaign. "When we went through the effort 10 years ago, PGE Park was a baseball facility. The best selling point to a relocated team and to public officials and private investors was, 'You didn't have to build a stadium on spec. With some modest improvements, PGE Park could be a three-to-four-year temporary solution while a new stadium was being built.'

"That is now the No. 1 hurdle I don't see how anybody could overcome. To appeal to lawmakers and public officials in today's environment to build a stadium without any assurance a team would relocate would be very difficult."

The A's would be reluctant to move, Kahn suggests, if they had to wait for a stadium to be built.

"You don't want to be a lame duck in your own territory," says Kahn, once general manager of the NBA's Indiana Pacers and Minnesota Timberwolves. "For a team to announce a move to Portland and have to survive for three to four years where it is (currently) playing, that would be problematic."

Then there is the issue of the Seattle Mariners, who have long considered Oregon as part of their territory.

"The Mariners would certainly resist any efforts to bring a team to Portland," Kahn says.

"I'm sure they would hate to see a club in there," Towers says. "But legally, I doubt if they'd have any grounds. It's so far away. It's not like the situation in the Bay Area, where the A's have talked about putting a club in San Jose and the Giants have done what they can to block it. Oregon is another state, Portland a city three hours away."

A big question, Harold Reynolds agrees, is the Mariners' territorial rights.

"Beyond that, the question would be, 'Is the Northwest big enough to handle two major-league teams?'" says Reynolds, the Corvallis native who played for the Mariners and now works as a broadcaster with Fox Sports and MLB.com. "If the Mariners and a Portland team both had a home game on the same night and I live in Vancouver, where do I go? I don't know if there's enough people to support both.

"But I'll say this: From the time when I graduated from high school in 1979 until now, Portland has transformed itself into a major-league city. The growth has been astounding. I'd love to have a team in Portland. It would be great to have the A's move there. What a rivalry it could be, with the Mariners 2 1/2 hours away."

Towers is of much the same mind.

"We've seen Portland is a major-league town, with the incredible support they've given both the Trail Blazers and the Timbers," he says "The big thing would be the venue. The most desirable scenario would be to have the stadium built (that a relocating team could inhabit immediately). It would have to be one similar to (Seattle's) Safeco Field, probably with a roof. Then a ballclub can decide if that's where it wants to go."

It would help, of course, if Portland had political leadership to influence a team's move and drum up public support. Vera Katz, the mayor in 2003, was very much involved with the process then. That is not the case with the city's current mayor, Charlie Hales.

"We're not working on that, at all, in this office," says Dana Haynes, Hales' communications director. "We assume it's highly unlikely to happen."

That doesn't dissuade

Lashbrook.

"It's not a priority (with Hales), but it's not about politics," he says. "This is about business, about connecting the dots between ownership and location.

"Normally, the mayor would be doing this. We don't have a baseball mayor. We don't have the political machinery. So Barry and I are saying, 'We're the real estate agent. We're connecting the dots.' "

**Lashbrook is not in favor of erecting a stadium** and then humming, 'They will come.' "

"I don't think we should build a stadium without a guarantee that a team is coming," Lashbrook says. Nobody in Oregon would support that."

Nor would the income-tax money through the house bill be available without a team announcing its intentions. So Lashbrook and Smith are investigating the possibility of using Hillsboro Ballpark as a temporary facility for the A's to use until a new stadium could be readied for use. Construction of a major league stadium generally takes several years.

"We could do it in three years," Smith says. "I think Portland could get its act together instantly."

Hillsboro Ballpark opened last year as home of the new Hillsboro Hops, a Class A Northwest League Arizona Diamondbacks affiliate. Year 2 for the Hops begins in June.

"We think with temporary seating, you could get the capacity to about 17,000," Lashbrook says. "The footprint is there. That's not illogical."

Towers isn't sure that would be big enough to satisfy a big-league team.

"Even with the lower payrolls, it's tough to run a viable franchise with even a packed house of 15,000 seats," he says. "I don't know if there would be enough revenue to survive."

(Oakland's payroll for the 2014 season is \$60.7 million, fourth-lowest in the majors.)

Lashbrook's answer: Consider the alternatives. The A's, he says, are in an untenable situation in Oakland.

"It's less than ideal for a team to be dormant while leaving a city, but that's the reality of moving," he says. "The long term is what should be focused on.

"We have a major piece of property, with more infrastructure than anyplace else. We have no neighborhood issue at the Rose Quarter. We have so much in place — location, population and some seed money. It's not a perfect situation, but give me the next-best alternative. There is none.

"Oakland has a big problem. They are desperate. They have to find a place to move the A's. They can't stay there. They've had problems with a sewage backup (at Oakland Coliseum) in the last week. They're not drawing (22,337 average attendance last season, 22nd in the major leagues). It's a broken model."

Lashbrook and Smith say they have been in touch with several current and former major league officials in recent months. None will speak on the record, but all have provided positive feedback, Lashbrook says.

"Nobody thinks we're crazy with our concept," he says. "We have reason to believe we're on the right track. The sports world knows Portland is a vibrant, growing city. The new commissioner

of baseball will have some different ideas. He'll want (the A's) to solve their problem, too. We're feeling very confident we're a solution in Portland."

The economic impact of major-league baseball in the city could be enormous, Lashbrook says.

"Baseball could help us build a new bridge," he says. "It's like putting 81 conventions in Portland a year. You'll get people from all over the state attending games. That headquarters hotel goes up tomorrow. The mayor will change his tune. Money talks."

Smith has grown more convinced as he has gotten more involved with the project. His firm finished third in the running when the Blazers were taking architectural designs for what to do with the coliseum several years ago.

"I have all the planning documents," he says. "The site is a tight fit for (a major-league park), but it works. Everything else is great. You have light rail, street cars, parking garages, freeway access and no neighborhood, and the city owns the property.

"The feedback we get is, major league baseball needs Portland more than Portland needs major league baseball. We're the young, growing, lively demographic that baseball is looking for. We keep having people take our calls, and they're calling us up, too."

With the major leagues' revenue-sharing plan, "the league is subsidizing the A's at about \$25 million a year," Smith says. "Other clubs are paying Oakland to beat them. We give them a chance to wipe that off the books. We're just putting the word out, and we keep getting pings back."

Pings are good. No stadium is bad.

But I applaud Lashbrook and Smith for their resolve. Denizens of the city of Portland have long had a defeatist attitude when it comes to pro sports. Maybe now is the right time for someone to take the bull by the horns.

Somehow, there has to be a way to make it work.