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# Orioles to play in Sarasota next spring

## Officials vote in favor of deal to have Orioles train in city

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Published: Thursday, July 23, 2009 at 1:00 a.m.

After three years of failed deal brokering with three teams, local officials saved spring training on Wednesday.

Just when even the slightest possibility of a baseball deal seemed unlikely, county officials reached an agreement with the Baltimore Orioles clearing the way for a 30-year contract with the team and a \$31 million renovation of Ed Smith Stadium.

Sarasota lost two teams, the Reds and Red Sox, because of money. It got the third team for the same reason -- the cost was right.

Both the city and county commissions approved a deal. Now the team and local officials have 150 days to reach a final agreement. The team is scheduled to start training in Sarasota next spring in the stadium as-is.

In an interview, Orioles attorney Alan Rifkin said he hoped the high level of detail in the 35-page agreement would convince everyone that the deal was basically done and that the terms of the lease and the project agreement are already worked out.

"For all intents and purposes the memorandum of understanding is the definitive agreement, subject to its terms," he said.

The deal finally came together after 10 months of negotiations because of several factors:

The Orioles, who played their spring in Fort Lauderdale this year, have long wanted to come to Florida's West Coast, and an offer by Lee County failed to lure the team there.

The deal became simpler when the city ceded control of the stadium so that the team was dealing with only the county, instead of two governments. The city's participation



STAFF PHOTO / E. SKYLAR LITHERLAND

City commissioners, including Terry Turner, second from left, Vice Mayor Kelly Kirschner, center, and Mayor Richard Clapp, right, listen to city attorney Robert Fournier, third from left, during a special meeting at City Hall on Wednesday. Commissioners voted 3-2 in favor of an agreement between the city, county and the Baltimore Orioles that clears the way for renovations of Ed Smith Stadium.

was limited to providing the existing facility.

Also contributing to the outcome is a change in attitude by county officials, who until recently considered the stadium a city obligation.

The team finally agreed to \$31 million, long a magic number for county officials.

The business community and the city leaders initially looked at the Orioles as the runner-up team, but it was clear Wednesday that even diehard Red Sox fans give the Orioles some respect now that they have faced the prospect of having no major league team in Sarasota.

"I'm so grateful to see the Orioles stepping in to save baseball that I vow to get season tickets for spring training," said Joel Parisi, a manager at Pastry Art downtown and a huge Red Sox fan.

Parisi says he will root for the home team -- except when it plays the Red Sox. Parisi also takes back all the bad things he said about the team when he compared the Orioles to actor David Hasselhoff and compared the Red Sox to Brad Pitt.

Earlier Wednesday, the City Commission nearly voted down the agreement because of concerns over how much the city could have to pay for potential environmental clean up costs at the stadium, which is the site of a former landfill. But it passed 3-2, with commissioners Kelly Kirschner and Terry Turner dissenting.

The County Commission voted 4-1 to approve the deal, with Commissioner Jon Thaxton dissenting.

Members of the business community and baseball supporters say the deal will give a big boost to Sarasota.

"The Sarasota county and city commissioners have redeemed themselves," said Bruce Franklin, who runs a Sarasota architecture firm.

What gets lost in the discussion of baseball is the amateur baseball tournaments and millions of dollars in room rentals these tournaments represent, said Curtis Odom, director of sales with Thayer Lodging Group, which owns two hotels in Sarasota County and one in Manatee County.

"Having the kind of facility the Baltimore Orioles hope to build can only bring in more," he said.

Another impact for tourism could come from a marketing package which includes radio and television air time advertising Sarasota as a vacation destination during games.

Virginia Haley, president of the Sarasota County Convention & Visitors Bureau estimates that the package is a \$1 million value every year.

Included in the deal are a Sarasota Night at Camden Yards, the Orioles' home field in Baltimore. Also, there will be a kiosk at Camden advertising Sarasota and promotional ads on Orioles' television and radio networks.

Sarasota officials will get once-a-year use of the Orioles' luxury suite at Camden Yards to woo meeting planners and make economic development contacts. It will also have use of the Orioles' suite at the Washington Nationals' baseball park in nearby Washington, D.C.

Orioles' lawyer Rifkin noted that the team would act as a conduit to introduce Sarasota officials to high-wage industries in the Baltimore-Washington area, such as biotech firms or the medical community through Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University.

John Cranor, chairman of the Sarasota Chamber of Commerce, reminded commissioners about an economic impact study that found the Orioles represented an annual stimulus of \$53 million, including the creation of 700 full- and part-time jobs. That is in addition to the 430 construction jobs the county estimates reconstructing the stadium would create.

Cranor urged commissioners to approve the deal: "True leaders find a way to seize both the opportunity and the moment."

The Orioles' average attendance is noticeably less than that of the Red Sox, the team that Sarasota spent the most energy trying to recruit to train here.

The Orioles averaged about 5,300 in attendance during a spring training game at the 8,000-seat Fort Lauderdale Stadium. The Red Sox have sold out every game at the 7,700-seat City of Palms for the past three seasons.

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