

Rockies make initial pitch for a Marana training site

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If the Colorado Rockies leave Hi Corbett Field, the team could move up Interstate 10 to a new spring training facility.

But not necessarily all the way to Phoenix.

Rockies officials met last week with representatives of the town of Marana to discuss the possibility of a stadium complex on the Northwest Side, most likely near Interstate 10 and West Tangerine Road.

Paying for that facility, however, depends on creation of a Regional Sports Authority with its own taxing power. The Pima County Board of Supervisors will consider the first step toward creating such an authority at its regular meeting this morning.

If the board gives the go-ahead, authorization will be required from the Legislature, which will probably be requested early next year. After that, the proposal would still have to go to voters, probably in November 2009, with action on stadium-funding plans possible as soon as early 2010.

"They have showed an interest," Marana Town Manager Mike Reuwsaat said. "We told them, if (moving) is an option . . . we think the Northwest Side is the place to go."

Tucson City Manager Mike Hein said the city does not support the idea.

"That adds a new twist to the idea of a sports authority to retain spring training in 'Tucson,' " he said. "The city and city staff are in no way supportive of any proposal that leaves no major league presence in Tucson to the benefit of other communities."

The Denver Post reported Saturday that talks between Marana and the Rockies about a new stadium are "ongoing." A team spokesman said in an e-mail Monday afternoon that it is too early to comment, though team owner Charlie Monfort told the Post he hoped to start building by mid-July.

That's not possible, said David Cohen, a member of a group of Tucson-area business leaders trying to save spring training. Funding for the stadium would most likely come from a regional authority that will not exist until 2009 at the earliest, he said.

"I think what the Rockies want to see between now and July is tangible progress," Cohen said.

The sports authority likely would be funded by tourism- and entertainment-related taxes on things such as hotels or restaurant meals. Cohen's group, now being referred to as Bases Loaded Tucson, will be the board members of an interim authority if the county Board of Supervisors approves their appointment

today. Their job will include identifying the new taxes to fund the authority and getting it approved by the Legislature.

An independent authority board, to be identified later, would decide how to spend the money.

In promoting the authority earlier this year, County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said Maricopa County is better able to lure and retain teams because its sports authority funds new stadiums and stadium improvements. The Chicago White Sox plan to leave Tucson for a new facility in Glendale.

If a replacement team is not found for the White Sox, the Rockies can break their contract with the city, and the Arizona Diamondbacks can break their contract with the county. The Rockies have asked for \$20 million in improvements to Hi Corbett Field.

Huckelberry said earlier this year that Marana would be a logical site for a stadium to bring new teams to Pima County, but he said Monday that he has concerns about using the authority to shift teams within Pima County.

"I don't think that we would want to facilitate hurting one community to benefit another, even if it's in our own backyard," he said. "It's not a good use of taxpayers' money when it's all the same taxpayers regionally. Now, if the city were to consent to it, that would be a different situation."

Huckelberry also said team representatives and business leaders should be cautious about promoting a move to Marana when the authority will need approval from voters, half of whom are Tucson residents.

Cohen said the Rockies met with Marana because they are looking at options that would allow the team to continue training in the Tucson area if an expansion or renovation of Hi Corbett Field isn't feasible.

"One of the largest goals of the group is to make sure Major League Baseball not only survives but thrives in the Tucson metro area," Cohen said. "The teams are our customers. We have asked them what it is they want, what it is they need."

If the Rockies were to move from Hi Corbett but stay in the region, Cohen said, the best fit would be on the Northwest Side, specifically in Marana.

"One of the most important things is, it's a little closer to the Phoenix teams, which means cutting down on travel for them," Cohen said. "We're just talking 20 miles, but 40 or 50 minutes of travel time."

Reuwsaat said the best place for a spring training facility is on the east side of I-10 at Tangerine Road, across the freeway from a 281-acre mall Westcor has planned.

However, no official offer to build a stadium in Marana has been made, Reuwsaat said, and the Town Council has not discussed the issue publicly or in closed session.

"We're in what you'd call a holding pattern," Reuwsaat said. "The only offer would be, if they're interested, to pull a group together and work with the regional group. It would still have to be a regional project. It still would have to be part of an authority."

If a new facility were built, either in Marana or elsewhere in the region, Cohen said, it would be built to accommodate two teams and could also be used for a rookie-level team and have other non-baseball uses.

"It would be used probably six to eight months during the year, not just for Major League Baseball," Cohen said.

No second tenant has been identified, Cohen said, though a meeting has been set up with Arizona Diamondbacks officials Thursday in Phoenix to "discuss their needs."

This wouldn't be the first time Marana has flirted with a baseball franchise about spring training.

In 1998, the Los Angeles Dodgers met with Marana officials about moving there from Vero Beach, Fla., with talks centered on an expansion of Tucson SportsPark, on the west side of I-10 at West Ina Road.

The Dodgers ultimately chose to stay in Florida, though in 2009 they are scheduled to move to Glendale.