

Mesa OKs Cubs deal, awaits word from team

by **Gary Nelson** - Jan. 26, 2010 12:00 AM
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A unanimous Mesa City Council threw the first pitch Monday night in a game designed to keep the Chicago Cubs in town for spring training.

The council approved a proposal to offer the Cubs a new stadium and practice complex at a cost of up to \$84 million in tax money, although a specific method of paying for it has yet to be devised.

In exchange, the Cubs would agree to negotiate exclusively with Mesa during the next three years over the details of the new spring-training facilities.

The "memorandum of understanding" sets out terms for Mesa to finance and build a stadium of at least 15,000 seats, clubhouse and practice areas exclusively for the team, and ballfields that the team and city would share.

The Cubs board of directors met over the weekend to consider Mesa's proposal and are expected to announce this week whether to accept the agreement.

The move appears to give Mesa a big edge over Florida. Business interests there have tried to lure the Cubs to move east, which would take an estimated annual economic impact of \$52 million away from Arizona. In recent years, several Major League Baseball teams have left their Florida spring-training homes for Arizona, making Florida more competitive to pull a team away from the Cactus League.

The council also approved offering amendments to the Cubs' current lease for Hohokam Stadium and Fitch Park. Currently, the team faces financial penalties if it leaves those facilities before its lease expires in 2016. If the Cubs agree to the city's offer and negotiate over the next three years, those penalties will be waived - even if, in the end, the Cubs decide to leave.

If the Cubs agree to move into a new Mesa stadium, the deal calls for them to stay for at least 25 more years.

Although several residents spoke Monday in opposition to public involvement in keeping the Cubs in town, council members said the payback is worth it.

"I look at this as economic preservation," Mayor Scott Smith said, referring to the city's efforts to keep the team that has practiced in the city on and off for more than 50 years. "The Cubs brand does create economic activity, more so than any other brand."

Even if the Cubs accept Mesa's deal, the 50-plus-year relationship with the team could be derailed. The Cubs would be committed to negotiating with Mesa only as long as the

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city and state met a series of deadlines.

The Legislature, which is tied in knots over an epic budget crisis, must design and approve a financing mechanism to help Mesa pay the public share of the project, which is capped at \$84 million.

City Manager Chris Brady said he expects House Majority Leader John McComish, R-Ahwatukee Foothills, to introduce the legislation as early as this week, with strong backing from Gov. Jan Brewer and House Speaker Kirk Adams, R-Mesa.

Another deadline involves the November election, in which Mesa voters likely would be asked to approve two questions. One would be a bond issue. The other would be triggered by a section of the city charter, which says voters must sign off on city-owned recreation or entertainment venues costing \$1.5 million or more.

Brady was optimistic about both the legislation and the election. "This might be one of the things (the Legislature) would like to do because everything else they're doing down there has gotta be miserable," he said. "And this is real positive news."

As for Mesa voters, Brady noted they approved the still-unbuilt Waveyard and Gaylord projects even though they were unknown commodities compared with the popular Cubs.

If all of the pieces come together, the eventual result would be a "Wrigleyville West," probably somewhere in east Mesa, that combines the baseball facilities with a Cubs- and Chicago-themed entertainment district, including hotels, restaurants, shopping and perhaps a baseball museum. Those developments would be privately

funded and would push the project's final cost far beyond the anticipated \$84 million for the baseball facilities.

"We're looking at something pretty spectacular," Smith said.

But if the city and state miss any of the deadlines, the Cubs would be free to talk with other parties - most likely in Naples, Fla. - about leaving Mesa.

Over the past several months, interests in Naples have made an aggressive bid to convince the Cubs they should buck recent spring-training trends and move their operations east.

Florida's effort continued into Monday, when Florida Gov. Charlie Crist proposed legislation that would provide up to \$15 million in state sales-tax revenue for spring-training facilities in communities that are trying to pull teams into the Grapefruit League.

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