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Dianne Feinstein leads charge for keeping 49ers in S.F.
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Who'd have thought that 49ers head coach Mike Nolan would only deliver the second-best pep talk at the Chamber of Commerce's annual football booster luncheon?

Channeling her inner linebacker coach, Sen. Dianne Feinstein stole the show Wednesday afternoon with an impassioned plea to accept San Francisco's plan for a new stadium and keep the 49ers' games within the city limits. Feinstein even finished up with a call and response cry, twice asking the sold-out crowd, "Where do you want the 49ers to continue to play?"

"San Francisco!" the fans roared.
The only person in the room who failed to get into the spirit was 49ers owner John York, who sat stone-faced at his table, just a few feet away, as Feinstein built to her conclusion.

"John York," she said, reaching toward his chair, which was directly in front of her podium, "it is all up to you. All you have to do is say, 'Yes.' "

York, of course, wasn't about to say anything of the sort. But that moment framed the status of the dispute of where the team will build its new stadium and host its home games in 2012. Officials agree a site must be ready for construction by June 2009.

The York family seems to favor moving to Santa Clara. Born and bred San Franciscans, like Feinstein, can't imagine the team playing anywhere but in the city.

And Santa Clara is doing its best impression of being invited on a blind date - it sounds like fun, but how much is it going to cost?

All of which leaves York in the middle, fending off media requests, which does not appear to be his favorite activity. I managed to catch him for a moment before the luncheon and his answers, in full, to three questions were: "Sure. She did. Sure."

The three questions were: "I guess you are glad to see that Sen. Feinstein took the time to come to the luncheon? Didn't she make a similar appeal at the Bill Walsh memorial?" and "I suppose you will be listening closely to what she has to say?"

Meanwhile, savvy Niners spokeswoman Lisa Lang is carefully avoiding riling the locals.
"We're working carefully with both cities to try to find a solution that is viable," Lang said. "Our goal is not about one city or territory, it is to stay in the San Francisco Bay Area."

However, it doesn't take much reading between the lines to get the impression that the 49ers ownership is moonstruck by the idea of a stadium near its practice field, next to the Great America amusement park.

Lang talks about the three nearby freeways, which, she says, handle the Silicon Valley commute without a problem. There's mass transit, she says (estimating that as many as 25 percent of the fans may take it), and besides, she says, the team sells "nearly the same amount of tickets to games to fans in Sacramento as to those in San Francisco."

Which, San Franciscans say, is missing the point.
"NFL teams belong in big cities," Feinstein says. "That's why it is so hard for me to imagine the team anywhere but

San Francisco."

Jim Lazarus, a chief of staff for Feinstein when she was mayor, and now a senior vice president with the chamber, recalls the flap when previous owner Eddie DeBartolo Jr. came up with an ill-advised idea to take the "SF" off the team's helmets.

"I told them, this is going blow up in your face," Lazarus says. "And it did, and they changed it back. People think of themselves as San Franciscans even if they live in Petaluma. When you go back East and people ask where you are from, you don't say Danville. You say San Francisco."

That may be, but this decision will be made on dollars and cents. Remember, last year's chamber booster luncheon was all about York doing a PowerPoint presentation of the new stadium that was to be built on Candlestick Point. Four months later, York announced that plan was off and the team was planning to move to Santa Clara.

So now, the city of San Francisco is promoting a site at the old Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, and Feinstein is working hard from Washington to secure needed funding for cleanup of toxic waste left behind by the Navy.

Mayor Gavin Newsom, taking care to compliment York for his efforts although the two have bickered in the past, used the luncheon to sketch out the proposal in glowing terms (assuming that the actual earth isn't still glowing). He described housing, retail space and a shiny new stadium on the water. But for now, it is still just a plan on a drawing board.

Meanwhile, in Santa Clara, residents have managed to contain their enthusiasm about hosting 10 huge home game extravaganzas every fall. Questions have been raised about everything from parking - with the weekend Great America crowds - to whether the relatively small municipality (population just over 100,000) can mobilize a large enough police force for game days.

"I think there is reason for concern in Santa Clara," Feinstein said. "One way or another it seems it is going to have to go to the ballot and there is some question as to whether the citizens are willing to pay."

Are they? Can San Francisco build its stadium? Will the 49ers leave the city?
Stay tuned. The only thing we know is that York is likely to be answering more of those difficult questions.
"Well," he joked, when he spoke at the luncheon after Feinstein and Newsom, "the first thing I am going to do is call Dwight (Clark) and Joe (Montana) and see if "The Catch" was more difficult than following two politicians."

Better get used to it. It will be happening a lot between now and 2009.