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Santa Clarans' backup plan on 49ers stadium

John Coté
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The battle for the San Francisco 49ers to pick a home has intensified.

Under the cloud of a fresh lawsuit, a group of prominent Santa Clara residents plans to launch its own effort today to get a stadium built in Silicon Valley.

That move comes as the developer for the proposed San Francisco site released new renderings of a stadium at Hunters Point, showcasing the waterfront location.

Former 49ers President Carmen Policy, an adviser for San Francisco site developer Lennar Urban, said that the Santa Clara deal still has a lot of details to be worked out and that San Francisco's site offered the chance for perhaps "the most stunning NFL venue in the country." But the city and developer offered no substantive changes to a stadium proposal the 49ers have passed over in favor of the South Bay plan.

Niners officials said they had not seen those images and remain focused on Santa Clara, where the team is financing a residents group that plans today to officially launch a petition drive asking Santa Clara voters to put a stadium proposal on the June primary ballot.

Even though the Santa Clara City Council voted unanimously early Wednesday morning to move forward with its own ballot measure in June for a proposed 68,500-seat stadium, the pro-stadium group fears legal challenges could derail the process.

They want a binding vote put to the people this summer - key to the team's hopes of having a new home for the 2014 football season - and say a voter initiative couldn't be held up by lawsuits like the one filed Monday challenging the city's environmental review of the project.

"The best way to make sure that the voters' decision is ironclad, and to avoid any argument concerning the election ... is to proceed with a voter initiative rather than having the City Council put this on the ballot," said Pat Kolstad, a former city councilman and one of the central figures in Santa Clarans for Economic Progress, which includes former city leaders, school officials and others.

Dueling measures
The move, though, complicates the ballot process and raises the prospect of dual measures, something the team has opposed in the past because it could be confusing to voters.

Santa Clara is facing a situation where city officials and the pro-stadium group are moving on parallel tracks, with the council directing city staff to prepare ballot language to take up at its meeting Tuesday.

Team officials say their goal is to still have one ballot measure, and they will try to reach an agreement with the city at that meeting.

"We're hopeful that this will all be worked out ... and there won't be two different measures," 49ers spokeswoman Lisa Lang said.

Team officials have been working with city staff for several months on the ballot language that will be given to the council, and "our plan is to take the same language and file it with a voter initiative," Lang said.

If the group officially starts the initiative process today, it would need to get about 4,500 signatures in time for certification for the June ballot.

Same goals
Vice Mayor Jamie Matthews, a stadium supporter, downplayed the possibility of competing measures.

"I don't think our goals and desired outcomes are divergent," Matthews said. "I think it will ultimately be up to the initiative proponents to determine whether or not they feel moving forward is critical in light of the council's actions."

The uncertainty in what will actually be put before voters comes as Cedar Fair, the Ohio-based owner of Great America, filed a lawsuit Monday seeking to void the proposed agreement between Santa Clara and the 49ers to build the stadium on a city-owned parking lot leased by the theme park.

The lawsuit contends the city has violated state environmental law, but an attorney for Cedar Fair wrote to city officials that the company hopes "to put this lawsuit on a back burner" and continue negotiations on how a stadium would impact the amusement park's business.

The lawsuit, questions over the ballot measure, and unresolved parking issues could play in San Francisco's favor, said Policy, who is advising Mayor Gavin Newsom in his efforts to keep the team in San Francisco.

"Things aren't as easy as they appear to be in Santa Clara," he said.

Policy said the waterfront setting at a redeveloped Hunters Point shipyard would be a valuable marketing commodity for a franchise.

The Niners, though, have long been concerned about access to the site and regularly praise the freeway, light rail and commuter rail connections in Santa Clara.

"We're pretty busy with what we're doing here," team spokeswoman Lang said.

Next steps
Tuesday: The Santa Clara City Council will consider ballot measure language for the stadium proposal.

April: The first round of approvals in San Francisco will start for the Hunters Point/ Candlestick Point development project. The proposal will include two options, one with a stadium, one without.

June 8: Date currently set for Santa Clara voters to decide on a stadium measure.

To read this article on line, please go to:
http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/12/09/MNGD1B1OP3.DTL&type=49ers

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San Francisco needs to stay in stadium game

Editorial
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SF Chronicle

On Monday night, the Arizona Cardinals will be coming to San Francisco to play the 49ers on prime-time television.

Many fans will arrive hours early for a tailgating ritual that is always longer and more intense for the marquee night games. The team and the city will receive national exposure, as they did when the 49ers played the Chicago Bears on Thursday, Nov. 12.

Enjoy it. Such weeknight games might be a thing of the past if the 49ers move to Santa Clara.

Buried in the thick environmental impact report on the 49ers' proposal for a Santa Clara stadium is the team's acknowledgement that traffic and parking issues would be significantly more challenging - perhaps even insurmountable - on weekdays.

On Sundays, the team hopes to use vacant parking spaces from nearby businesses. The report cited the 41,000 parking stalls within a 20-minute walk of the proposed stadium as more than enough to accommodate a sellout crowd of 68,500.

But on weekdays, many of those businesses might be reluctant to turn over their parking lots hours before a 5:30 p.m. kickoff for a Monday or Thursday game, the report noted.

The EIR said the 49ers indicated that they would "inform the NFL they will forgo weeknight games on their schedule" for any season in which they could not secure enough parking spaces.

That is a rather startling admission from a franchise that walked away from plans for a new stadium at Candlestick Point - where it had played many memorable Monday night games - mostly because of its access issues. The 49ers have been equally chilly about San Francisco's offer to incorporate a football stadium into Lennar Corp.'s redevelopment of the old Hunters Point Naval Shipyard just north of Candlestick. Again, the team's main complaint: parking and traffic flow.

Lisa Lang, the 49ers' spokeswoman, said the Santa Clara site offers much better access than the San Francisco option, even with the weekday problems. "There's really no comparison," she said. "The vast majority of our games are on Sundays, and this area is built for Silicon Valley peak times."

Lang said the team has alerted the NFL to the issue, and that one solution could be to start the games later in the evening. While a 7:30 or 8 p.m. kickoff might work better for local fans, it would deprive the team - and the city that is helping to build this $937 million sports palace - of a truly national audience.

In a phone interview, Mayor Gavin Newsom pointed out that, even as the 49ers look south, San Francisco has steadily worked through its checklist for the Hunters Point stadium option: toxic cleanup, voter approval, state legislation for land swaps. Newsom said the city has put together a "packaged project" that "with respect to Santa Clara, they simply can't offer, which is a world-class waterfront site."

The Lennar development is poised to proceed over the next 15 years with or without the stadium.

"We've done our part," Newsom insisted. "The question is, how long can we keep this possibility open without hindering the development?"

Santa Clara's City Council voted Tuesday night to move toward a June 8 election on the stadium plan. But with the serious parking challenges, and the complications of a lawsuit by neighboring amusement park Great America, this is a long way from a done deal. San Francisco needs to stay in the game.

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