

Unified Effort Needed For a New Stadium

DEVELOPMENT: Leaders in Various Sectors Must Step Up

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The Chargers will remain in San Diego for 2016 but it is unclear whether the team's owners and the city can reach agreement on a new stadium. Photo courtesy of San Diego Chargers

San Diego — The Chargers will remain in San Diego for 2016 but it is unclear whether the team's owners and the city can reach agreement on a new stadium. Photo courtesy of San Diego Chargers

San Diego — San Diego Chargers owner Dean Spanos recently announced his willingness to stay in town for at least 2016 and return to negotiations on a new local stadium, deemed by some as a key break in a months-long impasse between the team and government leaders.

Now comes what could be the much harder part: getting government officials and business interests, especially the influential and relatively insular hotel industry, together on a focused and unified plan to convince a skeptical voting public.

Observers say there are numerous moving pieces still to fall into place — some likely to be decided at the ballot box by year's end — to determine what exactly the city wants to pursue, how it should be financed, and how to present it to voters.

“To say it's challenging is an understatement, but it is doable,” said Jim Lackritz, a sports business MBA professor at San Diego State University. “The business community needs to be on board, and the hotel industry will definitely need to be a part of that.”

In his recent 2016 State of the City address — given a week before Spanos' Jan. 29 announcement — San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer said city officials will put a “legally defensible plan on the ballot” to finance a contiguous expansion of the waterfront convention center — a priority of the local hotel and tourism community — though he did not provide a timetable or other details. “It's time to settle this once and for all — and get the convention center expanded,” Faulconer said.

Following Spanos' announcement, Faulconer and county Supervisor Ron Roberts said they were open to discussing options including the Chargers' past preference for a downtown stadium, though Roberts has noted that the downtown route could prove much more expensive and time-consuming than the current Mission Valley site, where a good portion of financing and environmental preparations have been completed.

Need One Clear Voice

Lackritz said moving forward in 2016 will depend in large part on the alignment of interests among four parties — the business community, political leaders, the Chargers and voters. To get a stadium, convention center project or both built, the first three parties will need to speak with one clear voice to get voters on board, even if little or no new tax money is sought.

To get tourism and hotel leaders on board for a potential downtown multipurpose site, if that route is taken, Lackritz said someone in government or business will need to make the case that special events generated by such a facility on a year-round basis — such as concerts or nonfootball sports events — have benefits for the larger visitor sector that fuels much of the region’s overall economy.

On the political side, he said, it might be helpful if two local leaders — one Democrat and one Republican — get together on a nonpartisan leadership effort to bring various sides together on a plan of action. That will especially be needed to help “erase the memory” of the contentious city-Chargers exchanges of the past year.

It’s not clear how the business community will move to create clarity and drive voter support. The hotel industry is known to be weighing its next steps, including potentially its own ballot measure to fund a convention center expansion, or a legal challenge to an existing ballot proposal — targeted for the November election by a group that includes attorney Cory Briggs— that would raise the city’s hotel room tax by 5 percent while simultaneously dissolving the current hotelier-approved mechanism for funding tourism promotion.

Business groups such as the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, which were vocal and out-front in the recent past on city issues such as Barrio Logan development, housing developer fees and minimum wage increases, have generally maintained a low-key, background role on convention center and Chargers stadium matters.

Aimee Faucett, the local chamber’s chief operating officer, said the organization supports the current proposal for a contiguous expansion of the convention center, while also supporting ongoing efforts by Faulconer and Roberts to reach an agreement with the Chargers.

The chamber has not taken a position on whether to place a stadium downtown or in Mission Valley, and also has no official stance on various noncontiguous, downtown multipurpose stadium/event space proposals, put forward separately during the past three years by the Chargers and developer JMI Realty.

Can’t Retrace Steps to Petco

In terms of community consensus, said veteran local sportswriter Jay Paris, there’s little chance that the stars will align in the way they did in the late 1990s, when plans were being made for downtown’s Petco Park.

Paris noted that the San Diego Padres’ then-owner, John Moores, and his development team had earlier established long and deep ties to the local business community, and presented the city with a compelling vision for how the ballpark and surrounding East Village neighborhood would be built out. The successful November 1998 ballot measure that enabled the ballpark’s funding came before voters less than three weeks after the Padres appeared in the World Series.

Spanos has never significantly cultivated local community or business ties, he said, and the potentially lame-duck Chargers could be playing to small and/or quiet crowds in 2016, thanks to last year’s losing 4-12 record that will bring more lower-rung visitors such as the Tennessee Titans and Jacksonville Jaguars to Qualcomm

Stadium. Under those circumstances, the need to present voters with a compelling vision for a new stadium could prove even more urgent.

“There already wasn’t much goodwill between the team and the city to begin with, and the Chargers have only poisoned it with their shenanigans during the past year,” said Paris, who covered sports nearly 20 years for the former North County Times newspaper and now contributes to media venues including the Associated Press and sports radio station Mighty 1090.

Ballot Overload?

Erik Bruvold, president of the San Diego-based National University System Institute for Policy Research, said he will be watching for several factors that could impact the course of events this year. One is the larger national economy, in which conditions could positively or negatively affect local voters’ appetite for new public projects.

County and city leaders generally have been reluctant to put new funding measures before the public since 2004, when local voters approved a countywide measure aimed at improving transportation infrastructure, but narrowly rejected an increase in the city’s transient occupancy tax on hotel rooms.

Another factor is the potential impact of ballot overload, as numerous city and county measures could compete for voter attention this year, especially in November. As the year proceeds, business and government leaders may be motivated to coalesce around specific plans of action on both the stadium and convention center projects.

For anything to happen for the June ballot, things would need to be put in motion within the next month. More likely, Bruvold said, Nov. 8 will be the pivotal voting date, and the threshold for public approval will be high for issues designating public funds for specific purposes; California law requires the approval of two-thirds of voters in those cases.

“The conventional wisdom is that if there are a lot of ballot issues seeking new money placed in front of voters at the same time, they all will lose,” Bruvold said. “What you’ll probably see is a clearing of the ballot (field), possibly in the next four or five months.”

In addition to a mayoral election this fall, the city of San Diego will have a June ballot issue to decide on an increase in the minimum wage, and officials are considering another public measure to increase funding for basic city infrastructure.

At the county level, the San Diego Association of Governments is looking to place before voters, possibly this fall, a follow-up to the 2004 transportation measure that would address funding for other “quality of life” infrastructure needs.