

Current MLB to Portland Effort Big on Dreams, Short on Answers

Written by Maury Brown
Friday, 11 April 2014 15:47



“The A’s have a problem. Baseball has a problem. Portland is the solution.”

I’m talking with long-time Portland business associate, Lynn Lashbrook. Since 2000, he and I have been in steady contact about the possibility of bringing Major League Baseball to Portland. Lashbrook, the city’s biggest cheerleader for bringing MLB to the market, remains ever the optimist. I, given the changes in how the Montreal Expos relocation was structured, and the situation with the Major Leagues today, am not.

In a nutshell, the current effort to bring MLB to Portland is really Lashbrook, and architect Barry Smith. This was a far cry from 2000-2004 when MLB owned the Expos and were actively shopping relocation. At that time, the MLB to Portland effort included Mayor Vera Katz, the Oregon Sports Authority, a group called the Portland Baseball Group, a group of several lawyers, myself, Lashbrook, and others that had former Minnesota Timberwolves President and GM David Kahn pulling it all together.

The key then is nowhere near happening now: a club was owned by the league (Expos), and MLB was actively pursuing relocation. This simple, yet critical aspect, is why any discussion of the A’s or Rays relocating is a non-starter. Because without that, what you have are owners trying to leverage a ballpark deal, first in their market, and then only with the blessing of the league and a clear message that says, “Team up for sale,” does relocation to a new market occur.

But not even that has happened.

Time and again, the discussion has been that the A’s, mired for over 15 years in an effort to get a new ballpark while being stuck in an outdated facility (which has infamously saw toilets back

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up), is stuck in neutral. Owner Lew Wolff has pushed to get out of Oakland, and while San Jose has gone so far as to try and sue MLB to get the A's to relocate there, that market falls within the Giants operational territory, which they're holding onto like grim death. Since 2009, baseball commissioner Bud Selig has been "working on it" but the politics of the matter are far too thorny to get past. Force the A's into San Jose against the Giants will, and what's to keep that happening with other clubs elsewhere? Selig knows that with a majority of owners having to vote in favor of such a move, the consensus of the owners is not currently behind relocation to San Jose.

But, Wolff is actively looking to relocate. If not in the South Bay, then to Portland, right? No. In fact, Wolff has said his only interest in relocation is within the A's own territory. [From CSN Bay Area](#) (*emphasis*, *author*):

"I am hopeful of expanding our lease at the Oakland Coliseum for an extended term," Wolff wrote. "If we cannot accomplish a lease extension, I hope to have an interim place to play in the Bay Area or in the area that reaches our television and radio fans — either in an existing venue or in the erection of a temporary venue that we have asked our soccer stadium architect (360 Architecture) to explore. ***Looking outside the Bay Area and our media market is an undesirable option to our ownership at this time.***"

So, the drum being banged on MLB to Portland is not due to any actions on the part of the A's.

There are a host of logistic issues at play that even if the A's *were* courting the Portland market, make it difficult, if not impossible.

The Mariners, Giants and the Issue of a TV Deal

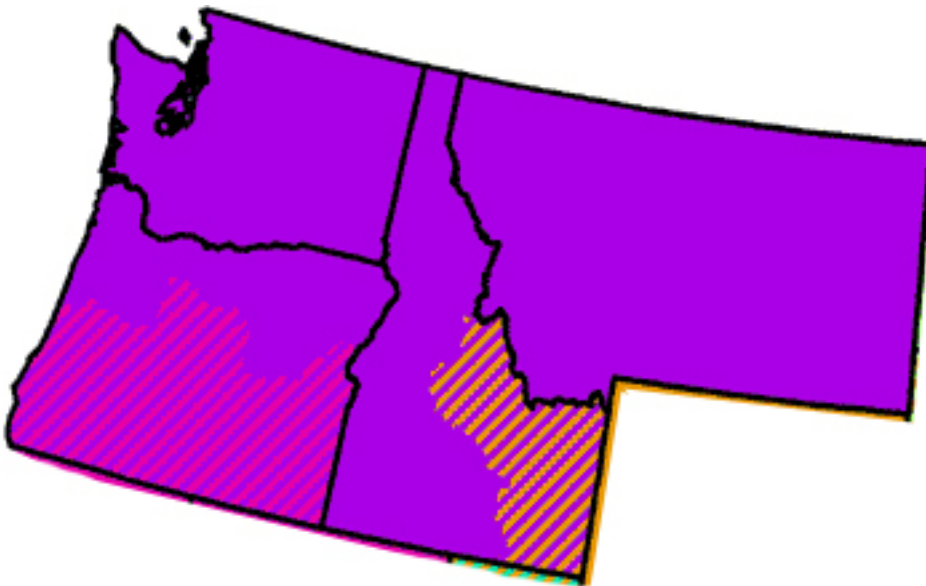
Lashbrook was quick to tell me that unlike San Jose, the Mariners hold no rights to Portland. This is true to the letter of the MLB Constitution, but doesn't address the 800-lbs. gorilla in the room, television.

The Mariners broadcast territory is vast, covering the entire corner of the Pacific Northwest (see purple in the image below), while the stripes in pink show where the Giants and A's broadcast

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territory overlaps. Since the ability of any club to be successful is based in large part on their local television rights deal, Portland has to somehow carve up a place in the midst of the competing interests of the Mariners and Giants. You might be able to control as far north as say, Longview, WA, and south to the border with California, but along the way, sharing would come into play, and worse, some form of indemnification to the Mariners and to a lesser extent, the Giants. This means carving up the pie three ways, as opposed to the A's sharing all of Northern California and half of Nevada with just the Giants. Lashbrook and other boosters in Portland will need to spend considerable time being able to answer this question in some capacity for a club to really consider relocation viability.



Outlined in purple, the Mariners broadcast territory is the largest in MLB, and an obstacle for Portland's MLB efforts

[See the entire MLB television broadcast territory map](#)

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The Temporary Ballpark That Doesn't Really Work

[A *Portland Tribune* article](#) this week by Kerry Eggers talks about how the Single-A Hillsboro Hops ballpark location could serve as an interim facility while a new MLB ballpark would be built. The Hops ballpark, just now entering its second season, seats 3,534 with a grass berm area for blanketed fans to sit on bringing capacity to 4,500. The ballpark wisely was built against the back of an adjacent football stadium so the single concourse for the ballpark uses the concessions and bathrooms originally built into the back of the football stands.

The *Tribune* article cites architect Smith as saying the footprint could be adapted to reach "15,000 to 20,000."

"There's enough room there to get it all done," Smith says. "We can get creative. The way to work with an architect is, you tell me what you want. Don't ask me what you can get. Demand. They're very creative, smart people. They'll figure something out."

"Figuring something out" bumps into some problems.

Because the ballpark is butted up against the football stadium, expansion on the third base side is not doable. Wrapping the home plate area is a frieze which protects fans from the sun and potentially rain. On the first base side you're pinned in by a parking lot. Beyond right field is the access road to the park. That leaves the berm area and center field as your expansion areas. To "get creative" would be to try and get temporary seating almost exclusively in that area. Even if it were 9,000 (nearly 3 times the seated area of 3,534 of the entire ballpark), it seems highly unlikely that creative people at the likes of Populous, HKS, et al, could do something that would meet those standards. (see the Hops ballpark footprint, below)

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Expanding the Hillsboro Hops Ballpark as an interim MLB facility bumps into physical limitations

But, maybe the biggest reason that it isn't feasible has nothing to do with size, or creativity. It has to do with partnership. No one approached the Hops—who would be critical partners in any such endeavor—to see what they think.

"I may have met Lynn [Lashbrook] one time. I definitely wouldn't know him if he walked by me, but nobody has talked to me," said Hops GM K.L. Wombacher in [an Oregonian article](#) . "I had a friend in baseball email me and that was the first we heard about it."

The Memorial Coliseum Dilemma

But, let's say it all comes together. A solution is reached to make the television situation pan out, and the Hops figure out a way to make the interim facility work. Then, it's all about funding for the ballpark.

No matter whether municipalities have gotten somewhat wiser, when it comes to building sports facilities for a private sports business, leagues still want the burden to fall on the taxpayers.

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The site targeted by Lashbrook and Smith is the languishing Veteran's Memorial Coliseum, just across from the Moda Center at the Rose Garden where the Blazers call home.

In a very "Portland" manner of approaching things, architects see the building as treasure and lobbied successfully to get it on the National Register of Historic Places. To add, the aging facility was built with an \$8 million bond approved by voters in 1954 to the "advancement of cultural opportunities for the community and to the memory of our veterans of all wars who made the supreme sacrifice." The actual memorial has been stuffed on a lower level, hardly visible to the public. Still, the original intent of the decaying facility has remained, and Veteran groups have spoken loudly that it's important to retain it. With the architectural significance, and the Vets clinging to the building, the Coliseum has turned into a white elephant that no one seem sure what to do with.

The ties of Smith to Lashbrook lends itself to the location. Smith was one of the architects that submitted plans for repurposing the Coliseum when the city opened up the topic to the public. Because of that, Smith had access to information about the Coliseum site, and property next to it.

A ballpark will not fit on the small footprint of the Coliseum, so Smith has creatively used a design that has the ballpark straddle Interstate Ave. to the west of the Coliseum onto land where a former Red Lion Inn was located. Who razed the hotel and owns that lots that could be suitable for part of the suggested ballpark? Aegean Corporation. Who owns Aegean? Portland Trail Blazers owner, Paul Allen.

So, you have to build a ballpark over a four-lane road, which is a potential post-9/11 concern, have to get the building razed, and you have to get Paul Allen interested in either selling property as well as looking for a party (the City of Portland) to purchase it.

There Isn't \$150 Million In State Funds, It's \$115 Million

If we target a location, and everything aligns, the ability to fund the development of the ballpark is by far the most daunting. Back in 2003, baseball boosters got funding passed, that initially would allow for \$150 million in player income taxes to be directed toward paying back construction bonds. It was highly creative, and since there is no sunset provision in the law, it sits waiting to be tapped.

But, it's not really \$150 million that's available. That was a capped amount. The reality is, it's \$115 million.

The following is [from the fully vetted package that Portland delivered to MLB](#) as part of the efforts to bring MLB to Portland when the Expos were up for relocation.

State Income Tax Bonds – \$115 million

On August 25, 2003, the Oregon State Legislature passed Senate Bill 5, which allocated all Oregon income taxes paid by baseball players and officials to pay up to \$150 million towards the construction of a MLB stadium. Because Senate Bill 5 does not sunset, this financing tool will be available whenever a MLB team relocates to Portland. (A copy of the bill can be found in the Appendix section of this document.) Analysis by the City applying the tiered bonding structure concluded that the bill can provide approximately \$115 million in project funding. While restrictions placed in the bill prevent the City from capturing the full \$150 million, Senate Bill 5 still represents the largest single component of the Plan.

Still, \$115 million is nothing to sneeze at. It's clearly a big start. The question then becomes, where does the rest of the funding come from?

Ultimately, you'd want an ownership group that is approved by MLB to step up and offer a solution. That solution would certainly be dripping with "public investment." To date, Portland Mayor Charlie Hales, or Governor Kitzhaber has not lent their support.

Why Portland Is Still High On the List, and Why Lashbrook Is Important

Nothing in this is to say that Portland as a market should ever be out of a serious conversation as a relocation candidate. The market size and its pro league clubs-to-population ratio is far higher than several markets that currently host MLB clubs.

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And, just because Lashbrook doesn't have answers to the details to make an MLB to Portland effort happen, it doesn't mean that he's not a valuable asset to those that wish to one day see Major League Baseball arrive in the city. He's a tireless, energetic force that is not only wanted for such an endeavor, it's needed.

It's those damned details that are getting in the way of the fun. Details that move efforts from "dream" to something closer to "reality." When I was first approached about this current effort, my biggest advice was "work quietly behind the scenes." That in doing so, politicians, MLB, and owners like Lew Wolff would not be placed in an uncomfortable spot of having to publically address MLB to Portland before anything substantive had been pulled together.

As it was in 2003, so should it be now. When the Expos were up for relocation, it provided Portland an opportunity to take a detailed examination of the market and report the findings, regardless of what club might actually land here one day. Focus on the "market viability" not "baseball has a problem, and we have a solution that has no answers to the major questions." The former, not the latter, is where efforts to bring MLB to Portland should be. Until then, the dream will likely continue.



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