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Without Lease, Nats Are on Shaky Ground

By Dave Sheinin and Barry Svrluga
Washington Post Staff Writers
Tuesday, December 20, 2005; E01

One year ago today, District Mayor Anthony A. Williams and D.C. Council Chairman Linda W. Cropp announced an agreement on financing for a new baseball stadium, and fans of the nascent Washington Nationals exhaled. The political haggling apparently was over. Baseball's permanent return to Washington, it seemed, was ensured.

Yet a year later, the Nationals' situation in the city remains in turmoil. Their latest marquee hurdle -- a council vote on a lease for the proposed new stadium on the Anacostia River waterfront -- was supposed to be today, but Williams yesterday put off the vote in the interest of refining the lease and shoring up support.

Against this backdrop, the Nationals, slated to begin their second season at RFK Stadium in less than four months, are trying to conduct business. "It's less than ideal," Nationals President Tony Tavares said.

An affirmative vote on the stadium lease by the 13-member council would secure the Nationals' future in Washington, with an agreement that would keep the team in the nation's capital for at least the next 30 years. Within a matter of weeks, or even days, MLB would announce the sale of the franchise to one of eight groups willing to pay \$450 million.

However, a down vote on the stadium lease would place the future of the Nationals on shaky ground yet again, and could further delay a decision on a new owner.

In a letter to Cropp dated yesterday, MLB President Robert DuPuy said baseball is willing to take the matter to arbitration should the city fail to approve the lease. Baseball officials are confident the league would prevail in court, because they believe the stadium agreement they signed with Williams on Sept. 29, 2004, is binding.

Another MLB official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because the subject is so sensitive, said the league's formal response to a failure by the city to endorse the lease likely would be to announce that baseball was forced to "explore any and all options" for the Nationals' future. The implication: Baseball might seek to move the Nationals, or even revive the concept of contraction, eliminating the franchise as part of a new collective bargaining agreement with the players' union.

"The fact is, there are a number of cities that had even more generous deals on the table than we did," Williams said yesterday during a radio interview on WTOP-AM. "[MLB] could potentially try to leave, and we could be out money for damages."

Beyond pursuing arbitration, however, the league has revealed little about its worst-case scenario strategy. Top executives from both the league and the union declined interview requests yesterday. However, one such executive, speaking on the condition of anonymity, played down the possibility the Nationals would be contracted, citing the obvious market value of the franchise and the potential windfall its sale would bring to MLB's other 29 owners.

"Anyone who brings up contraction [in this negotiation] is just posturing," the official said. "They're not going to

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contract. We're not talking about the Expos anymore -- losing \$40 million a year in Montreal. We're talking about a team worth \$450 million, that made \$10 million last year."

At the same time, however, that profit was earned during a season in which the debutant team, riding a wave of goodwill and novelty, exceeded expectations by leading its division well into July and remaining in playoff contention until the season's final weeks, finishing with an 81-81 record. The Nationals drew more than 2.7 million fans, ranking 11th of 30 MLB teams.

Under normal circumstances, the franchise might be expected to build upon that momentum as it looks ahead to 2006. But this is no normal franchise, and there are signs that the political wrangling and inherent uncertainty have negated whatever momentum once existed.

The Nationals had a season ticket base of roughly 22,500 last season, and their goal is to retain 85 percent of that for 2006, which would mean about 19,125 season tickets sold. Team officials said yesterday that, despite the fact the team raised most ticket prices by between \$1 and \$5 per seat per game, the Nationals have about 17,500 commitments for season tickets next year. Partial season ticket plans of either 41 or 20 games won't go on sale until after Jan. 1.

Tavares said that the team has retained 77 percent of its season ticket revenue from 2005, "and that's without hard-pressing anybody, having our salespeople call and say, 'Why aren't you renewing?'"

Still, Tavares acknowledged that the protracted battle over the lease has affected some fans.

"Given the fact that the council has been dillydallying with this lease and creating uncertainty," Tavares said, "some people have told us that, 'We don't want to make the emotional investment in the team if we think it's going somewhere else.' Those are the exact words of some of the people we've heard from who aren't renewing yet."

The Nationals' instability has already hindered their pursuit of free agents. The club lost two stalwart pitchers, Esteban Loaiza and Hector Carrasco, and has added only bench players via free agency. (New outfielder-second baseman Alfonso Soriano was acquired in a trade.) General Manager Jim Bowden was granted a payroll of roughly \$60 million, about \$7.2 million more than the team spent last season, but said at baseball's winter meetings that several free agents were reluctant to sign with Washington because there were too many questions surrounding the future of the franchise.

The political battles, people inside and outside baseball said, are having an impact on the Nationals both on and off the field.

"You wonder what the extent of the traditional buzz that you get from having a new team will be," said David Carter, executive director of the Sports Business Institute at the University of Southern California. "Will it be offset by the growing fatigue associated with the political process?"

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