



Atlanta Braves executives 'can't wait' to land in North Port stadium

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SARASOTA - Atlanta Braves executives touted their commitment to bring spring training baseball to North Port to local leaders on Tuesday morning.

It was the team officials' first public appearance here since discussions began more than a year ago to relocate the Major League Baseball club to a new spring training stadium and practice facility in the West Villages district, just south of the State College of Florida campus in North Port.

"We can't wait until this complex comes out of the ground and we make that our home for the next 30 years in Sarasota County," said Braves Vice Chairman John Schuerholz, who will be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame this summer.

"We know what it takes to have a win-win, to be beneficial, to be good partners, and we intend to do that here," Schuerholz continued. "We only hope you give us that opportunity ... We are very, very confident that we will come to a very, very successful, mutually beneficial agreement that we can announce soon."

New details have emerged in the past week about the planned stadium complex after the team announced that it is now negotiating exclusively with Sarasota County and the West Villages to relocate here, after nearly a year of discussions with Sarasota and two other counties.

In a show of support, the biggest names from the team's front office accompanied Schuerholz, including Braves CEO Terry McGuirk, President of Baseball Operations John Hart, General Manager John Coppolella and Jonathan Schuerholz, son of the vice chairman and now the team's assistant director of player development.

"We enjoy what Sarasota County has to offer. We've done our due diligence, we know what this county is about, we know what their leadership is about, we know what their commitment to projects is like," Schuerholz said after the presentation. "They know about ours as well; we're regarded as the gold standard organization in Major League Baseball. That will be a great partnership."

Latest plans

The newest plans for the project show a \$75 million to \$80 million complex on about 70 acres off West Villages Parkway, including a 6,500-seat stadium, team clubhouse, training facilities, a half-dozen practice baseball fields, six multi-use fields and space for the team's sports medicine and player academy.

The complex is envisioned to become the heart of a planned "town center" commercial and residential district in the West Villages and

will create opportunities for the college and nearby medical practices to partner with the team and its affiliates, officials have said.

Financing for the project includes roughly \$22 million in county tourist development taxes, \$20 million in state stadium grants and \$4 million to \$5 million in North Port contributions. The remainder would be covered by the team's lease plus infrastructure improvements and land donated to the project by the West Villages' development partners.

The Braves have been searching for a new home for spring training for almost two years as the team nears the end of its lease at Disney's Wide World of Sports in Orlando, where it has trained since 1997. With a new stadium opening this year in Palm Beach, though, it is now the only team training in central Florida.

The opportunity to build a new complex in North Port would put the Braves in the heart of the Grapefruit League's west coast teams and greatly reduce travel time - with no more than a two-hour drive to eight other teams.

The team's academy also will be a year-round facility for players in the Braves development program to train and for those in rehabilitation, bringing a new sports medicine hub to the North Port area, Schuerholz said. He also suggested the team would consider bringing a minor league affiliate to stadium at some point, noting one affiliate signed a four-year agreement in Kissimmee in the fall.

But it will take an aggressive schedule over the next several months to finalize a series of agreements and financing for the park in order to begin construction and open on time, Schuerholz and West Villages General Manager Martin Black said.

The county, team, West Villages and eventually the city of North Port will all have to resolve those agreement details, County Administrator Tom Harmer said Tuesday morning. Several team executives will attend Tuesday night's North Port City Commission meeting to ask the board to authorize its administrators to formally negotiate those

agreements with the team, as the County Commission voted to do last March.

The Sarasota County Commission itself will have to consider about a half-dozen of those project items, including a letter of intent, a lease agreement, a project development agreement and an inter-local agreement with West Villages Taxing District, Harmer said.

With so many moving pieces, Schuerholz and local officials avoided outlining a specific timeline to formalize those agreements after the presentation.

"We want to be in this facility by 2019," Schuerholz told the County Commission. "Time is not our friend. It wasn't our friend either when we just built this beautiful SunTrust Park and The Battery mixed-use development in Atlanta," where the team will play its regular season home games.

"We didn't have time as our friend, but we managed through the leadership of a number of people (here today)...; to get that done," he continued. "And we intend to do that here. We'll be good partners. We understand what it means to be citizens of Sarasota County."

In the community

The move to North Port will be a bit of a homecoming for Schuerholz, who served as general manager for the Kansas City Royals when the team had a player development operation in Sarasota in the 1980s.

The Royals "built the academy out on Clark Road ...; we chose Sarasota County as the place to do that," he said. "My wife and I lived on Siesta Key for 10 years; I remember it well. I remember the greatness the fondness and beauty of this community."

Schuerholz's and local leaders' excitement was palpable in the commission chambers in downtown Sarasota on Tuesday morning. Black, the West Villages director who has spearheaded negotiations,

donned a Braves jersey with "West Villages" across the back and the number 19 -- for 2019.

"I obviously fully support this," Commissioner Charles Hines said. "As a lifelong resident, I'm very excited. This, to me, is the biggest announcement I've seen here in my lifetime. It makes me proud that you are excited about our community."

Commissioner Mike Moran lauded the team's inclusion of its academy and player rehab facility as jewel of a new, very specific economic development plan he is pushing the commission to pursue.

Commissioner Nancy Detert, who helped write the law offering state grants to keep spring training teams in Florida, also said she likes the opportunity.

Despite their enthusiastic support, though, commissioners also stressed that they want the facility to be a year-round operation and will carefully review the financing.

"Doing business in Florida is not an easy thing," Commission Chairman Paul Caragiulo said. "It's marriage counseling at a comedy club sometimes, so I appreciate you being aware of that process."

"This community is very engaged and scrutinizes things heavily as any intelligent community should," Caragiulo continued. "So going forward, since a whole lot wasn't known before today, it's so important that we be responsive when people ask for information. That's what they expect and what they deserve."

After the presentation, Schuerholz also addressed common outcry that teams making stadium deals that receive public money are recipients of "corporate welfare."

"We are contributing partners to a very robust extent in this project," he told members of the media. "So I don't think there's any corporate welfare involved in this project at all. We're paying our fair share of this project, and that's the way we decided to go about it."

In addition, area transportation planners hope the stadium plan will bolster Sarasota and Charlottes counties' [continued pleas for state funding to expand and improve River Road](#). During a joint meeting in Venice on Monday, the boards of the Sarasota-Manatee and Charlotte County-Punta Gorda Metropolitan Planning Organizations decided to pursue \$10 million from the state to get the widening of River Road at least partially started on the back of the Braves' announcement.

But the stadium deal also [hinges on the issuance of the state stadium grant](#), which could find itself on the hot seat as GOP legislators look to roll back a series of incentives programs in the upcoming session. No specific proposal has been made to eliminate the incentive needed for the Braves deal, so local leaders are proceeding as normal but are cautiously watching the Legislature's discussion, they said last week.