



Sarasota County endorses initial agreement with Atlanta Braves

Tuesday

Posted Feb 28, 2017 at 8:22 PM

Updated Mar 1, 2017 at 9:16 AM

The letter of intent sets the terms of the financing, construction and eventual management of the proposed spring training stadium in the West Villages in North Port.

By

Staff Writer

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VENICE — The planned deal for a new Atlanta Braves spring training stadium received its first approval Tuesday afternoon, marking an important turning point in whether the deal becomes a reality later this spring.

The initial agreement, known as a term sheet, outlines some of the basic finance, construction and operating commitments for the total \$75.4 million baseball stadium and training complex in the West Villages near U.S. 41 and River Road in North Port.

The agreement would bind the club, Sarasota County, the city of North Port, West Villages Improvement District and West Villages developers to certain aspects of the final deal that is still being negotiated and lay the groundwork for the melting pot of financing from each of those parties.

The Sarasota County Commission voted 4-1 to approve the terms, but only after commissioners raised serious questions about naming rights for the would-be stadium and public access to its numerous baseball and multi-use fields.

Commission Chairman Paul Caragiulo cast the vote against the agreement, despite supporting the overall project, because of his concerns that the initial term sheet does not specifically outline how much access the county, city, planned schools nearby and the public would have to a plaza and multi-use fields around the stadium.

"I am very concerned with this project," he said. "I want to see it happen, big fan of the idea, I'm just still not comfortable enough to support this today going forward."

The terms outlined in the agreement cover each party's funding commitments and the basic design of the complex, including details that the stadium have 6,500 seats, 1,500 berm and concourse tickets, six training baseball fields, a public plaza outside the stadium and an academy for player development and rehabilitation.

The terms also stipulate that the county and city will be allotted 20 days every year to host public events in the stadium, but that the parties will negotiate further about the availability of the plaza and multi-use fields, County Attorney Stephen DeMarsh said. A long-form operating agreement, expected to be presented to the commission in late March, would spell out those details, he and County Administrator Tom Harmer added.

Negotiators, including the team, developers and government staff, have all promised the final agreement will include broad public access to those fields, and West Villages General Manager Martin Black has underscored that plans for elementary and middle schools just north of the stadium also make that access important. The team is obligated to host events at the complex outside of training, such as regional youth baseball tournaments, which also are likely to bring the public to the facility.

"There is so much detail to come, so much work to be done," DeMarsh said.

But Caragiulo insisted the county should be more specific up front that the public have more access and demonstrable "community benefit" from the plans.

"This county puts a premium on transparency," he said after the meeting. "This (term sheet) is like asking me to put a gold star on your work and post it on the refrigerator. No, I have questions. It's 30 pages of (agreement), so I want to see this public access enumerated there."

Other commissioners expressed similar concerns, but supported the terms to advance the negotiations.

Commissioner Nancy Detert stressed that she wanted to stipulate that the county receive any revenue from the sale of naming rights to the stadium.

The terms of the initial agreement say the team is to be able to sell those rights, ostensibly to help pay its \$2 million to \$2.5 million expected annual contribution to the stadium, DeMarsh said.

Although other commissioners seemed to support her concerns, no amendments were made to the terms, which now still include that the team is to retain revenues from naming the stadium.

Ultimately, commissioners agreed, there is more negotiating to be done and time to refine public access issues in the series of agreements due before the board in coming months.

The term sheet must also be approved by the North Port City Commission and the West Villages Improvement District, the taxing district that encompasses 11,000 acres of the former Thomas Ranch that will eventually include 20,000 residences and 3 million square feet of commercial space. Both will consider the agreement at their respective meetings next week.

Staff from each party then will develop a formal, long-form operating agreement for each commission to vote on, Harmer and County Economic Development Director Jeff Maultsby said.

Only then can the West Villages district apply to the Florida Sports Foundation for a \$20 million state spring training stadium grant that is the linchpin of financing for the deal. Later this spring more agreements on tourist development tax changes, project development agreements and inter-local agreements would all be due to each of the parties, too, officials added.

"There's some room for discussion. I would like to see this to proceed, move forward, get the application in front of the state, let the Atlanta Braves know Sarasota County wants them here," Commissioner Charles Hines said. "Over the next couple months, many of the questions we've raised today will be included in those agreements ... If it doesn't, that's where the rubber meets the road, you could say no."