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## North Port commissioners move forward with spring training facility

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Approved letter of intent with Atlanta Braves for \$75 million stadium

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NORTH PORT — After lengthy deliberation and concerns that the city may not be getting its due billing as the spring training home of the Atlanta Braves, city commissioners unanimously approved the broad outlines of an agreement for construction of the \$75 million baseball facility.

On the way to that 4-0 vote, deliberations followed a winding path that touched on the city's concern that it was again being treated as a stepchild of Sarasota County — a sentiment that, in this case, was based partly on the city's late entry into the negotiations and the absence of references to North Port vs. the West Villages development in the marketing and naming of the stadium.

The board received reassurances from City Manager Jonathan Lewis, West Villages Improvement Board Chairman Marty Black and Sarasota County Economic Development Director Jeff Maulsby that North Port will figure prominently in tourism marketing. But Black also warned that changing the letter of intent agreement over naming rights for the stadium was an issue that would trigger renegotiation of the contract, potentially tripping up the deal.

Black noted that the developer is matching the \$300,000 annual contribution that would be made by the city, as well as fast-tracking infrastructure improvements and donating the land for the Braves site.

"We want some recognition that you're in the community of West Villages," Black said, referring to visitors to the complex. He added: "There's a difference between marketing the location and having that on the logo of the stadium, if you will, having that name."

While Mayor Linda Yates and Commissioner Debbie McDowell pushed hardest to bring North Port's name front and center and secure definitive promises of year-round use of auxiliary fields, especially in light of the city's commitment to pay \$300,000 a year over 30 years, Commissioner Chris Hanks worried the board could jeopardize the deal.

"If we mess this up because we nuance this to death, we'll never come out of that red-headed stepchild feeling," Hanks said, arguing that the growth spurred by the stadium's presence will likely generate enough tax income to offset city costs.

"You're not going to be losing anything, when you look at the economic impact," Hanks said. "We're going to be gaining like crazy."

"We haven't even signed the letter of intent and the synergy has been crazy," he said, then added that the stadium growth will bring additional restaurants and hotels that citizens have sought.

Still, the City Commission acknowledged that the source of the city's \$300,000 annual contribution has not yet been identified, beyond the likelihood that it would come from the general fund.

The board approved the letter of intent with provisions that the final contract will cover five areas of concern:

- Technical language that releases the city of liability of any kind.
- A notation that local contractors will be given preference for construction.
- Removal of not-to-exceed language for stadium use, in the event that all parties agree to more than 20 days of promotional events in the stadium.
- Additional use of the overflow fields and plaza be documented.
- North Port must be referred to in all marketing and promotional items for the facility — not including the naming rights.

At least one of those four items has been addressed in a March 6 letter from Braves General Manager John Schuerholz to the city, that the team expects the plaza and overflow fields be used frequently.

The West Villages Improvement District will be asked to sign off on preliminary terms at a board meeting on Thursday.

After that, representatives from the county, city, West Villages and the Braves will develop a formal, long-form operating agreement for each party to vote on. Then West Villages can 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 be due to each of the parties.

