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Knights: More delays possible

By April Bethea

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The Charlotte Knights say they may have to push back the opening date for a planned baseball stadium in uptown again, and are contemplating whether it makes “financial sense” to continue with the project at all.

Dan Rajkowski, general manager and team vice president, said the Knights still believe a move to Third Ward would be best for the minor-league team.

But he said a lengthy legal fight over the stadium with Charlotte attorney Jerry Reese and the bad economy have kept the team from closing on a financing deal for the ballpark. In addition, the cost of project keeps rising and now is estimated at \$62 million – up from \$42 million three years ago.

The Fort Mill, S.C.-based team wanted to have the new stadium ready by 2009, but have already delayed it for a year.

The team is looking into ways to pay for the project, including securing a naming rights deal. Rajkowski would not rule out asking Mecklenburg County for money, though he said at this point the team has not formally asked for anything.

“Somehow or another there's going to be a gap of what makes sense for the team to do this project and what actually it's going to require to do it,” Rajkowski said. “That gap could be \$10 million. It could be more with another year's delay. Where do we find that money? It's not going to fall out of the sky.”

Getting county commissioners, who approved a lease for the stadium earlier this year, to pay money for construction of a stadium could be tough.

Under a lease agreement, the Knights have pledged to pay for the roughly 10,000-seat stadium in exchange for leasing about eight acres of county land for \$1 per year. The county also approved an \$8 million grant for infrastructure near the stadium site, land originally eyed for a county park. The county plans to build a new park near the stadium.

Commissioner Bill James, a consistent critic of the stadium project, said the county has already spent too much on it. “If the whole goal for this is to have taxpayers write an even

bigger check to build this, my answer... is forget about it," he said.

Commissioners chairman Jennifer Roberts said leaders will need to look closely at the baseball deal, and how things have changed since the plan was first announced.

"Our initial explanation to the voters was it was not going to entail any tax money for the actual stadium," she said. "With this project in particular, as well as the county expenses in general, I think there's a sense that we want to be very careful in putting a burden on families who are trying to keep their homes and put food on the table."

Ted Arrington, a political science professor at UNC Charlotte, said history may make some commissioners leery. He pointed to former Charlotte City Councilwoman Lynn Wheeler, who lost her last bid for office largely because of her support for an uptown basketball arena.

Rajkowski said moving the team to uptown could make the team more popular. The team, which had lost money in the past, broke even in 2007 and could do so again this year.

The next two to three months will be crucial, Rajkowski said. In August, he said officials extended a commitment letter tied to the financing deal, which meant team owners had to personally guarantee all loans for the project. He said the team needs to begin full site development within 90 days or the stadium won't be able to open by 2010.

Still, Rajkowski remains optimistic. "We've just got to keep our eye on the big prize, which is getting (a stadium) uptown and realize that the road is not going to be easy," he said.



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FINALLY, reality sets in. It was never financially viable for the city, taxpayers or the team owner. MLB. Forget it.