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Chargers, S.D. discussing downtown stadium

15-acre site near Petco Park eyed for \$1 billion project

By [Matthew T. Hall](#)

Tuesday, November 10, 2009 at midnight

OVERVIEW

Background: The Chargers have pushed for a new stadium since 2002, saying the higher revenues it would generate would make the team more competitive. Since 2006, a search has focused elsewhere in the county.

What's changing: San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders and Chargers President Dean Spanos and their aids are discussing a possible downtown stadium site.

The future: Representatives plan to meet in the weeks to come.



SAN DIEGO — After years of watching other cities tease the Chargers with talk of a new stadium, San Diego has become the team's leading suitor again by dangling the possibility of professional football near Petco Park. Mayor Jerry Sanders discussed the downtown idea in a private meeting with team President Dean Spanos two weeks ago. That prompted Escondido to stop wooing the team while San Diego revisits the stadium issue for the first time since 2006 when the Chargers rejected rebuilding at the Qualcomm Stadium site and began exploring options elsewhere in the county.

The focus on downtown has fueled optimism among community leaders and created anxiety among property owners who might be displaced by a \$1 billion stadium project.

The roughly 15 acres being eyed for a stadium includes city-owned Tailgate Park close to Petco Park, the privately owned Wonder Bread building and the bus yard for the San Diego Transit Corp., owned by the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System.

Sanders has long said he would oppose using public funds toward construction of a new stadium, but mayoral spokesman Darren Pudgil said yesterday that the Mayor's Office is looking at all of the ways cities have helped with stadium construction. Pudgil said two options could be infrastructure financing and borrowing money against future redevelopment revenues downtown.

Everyone from team officials to potentially affected property owners say the project's financing is its main hurdle.

"Somehow, somebody still has to come up with the money to build this big, expensive stadium," said Bob Sinclair, who owns the Wonder Bread building. "I don't know how they're going to get over that delta for the cost."

Sanders and Spanos met for about an hour on Oct. 27 at the La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club. It was their first meeting since Jan. 7, although city and team officials have talked since then. Sanders called Spanos in July and early October, and Sanders' aides met with a team representative in April, May and mid-October. Future meetings will explore the city's role in the project.

In an interview last week, Sanders said contacts are more frequent now because the political landscape has changed since April 2006 when he said San Diego lacks the time and money to focus on a new Chargers stadium.

In particular, Sanders said, the city has a less combative city attorney since Jan Goldsmith replaced Michael Aguirre and the team has stopped exploring sites in Chula Vista, National City and Oceanside.

"I don't want to say the Chargers were not important because they were, but I think that after four years, we certainly have to give them a signal on what we intend to do or how we want to do it or what we can do," Sanders said. "And then start working together to see if we can achieve a solution."

Sanders and Spanos have met privately three other times, once in January 2006, about six weeks after the mayor took office, and twice in October 2006.

Building a football stadium downtown has been kicked around San Diego before. In 2003, the year before Petco Park opened, then-Mayor Dick Murphy's citizens task force on Chargers issues examined a downtown stadium site while studying a replacement or upgrade of Qualcomm Stadium.

At the time, the task force noted that building on the large bus storage facility in East Village was an option but would require a relocation of the fleet and likely an environmental cleanup. On the plus side, it found, the area has 57,000 parking spaces within 1.5 miles.

Property owners in the area are mixed on the idea of a downtown stadium. Sinclair, whose Wonder Bread building on 14th Street dates to 1898 and is about 20 percent leased, said the location makes sense for a stadium because it is accessible, has ample parking, is made up of only a handful of parcels and probably isn't too contaminated from the buses.

While some people believe the team may eventually give in to the temptation of a new stadium proposed for the Los Angeles-area City of Industry, Sinclair expects the team to stay local.

"If they're reasonable enough, they could make a deal with everybody on our little block," he said.

Yet Eddie Zaitona, the longtime owner of Logan Market & Liquor on 16th Street, which could be in the stadium's footprint, doesn't want to leave.

City officials have not ruled out using their eminent domain powers for the stadium, Pudgil said yesterday. For now, the city and team are agreeing to a series of regular meetings to study the stadium concept.

Escondido Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler said she will stand by in case talks break down in San Diego, but she isn't hoping for that outcome.

"The way I see it, we're all engaged in trying to make sure the Chargers stay in San Diego," she said. "I think (the downtown San Diego location) is a beautiful site."

Chargers special counsel Mark Fabiani, the point person on the team's stadium search, has long said a downtown stadium makes financial sense because infrastructure improvements to accommodate a stadium of up to \$1 billion elsewhere could cost \$200 million, but they are a fraction of that downtown.

Both Fabiani and Sanders said they want to know quickly if the site is economically feasible for the team. A site of that size would be among the National Football League's smallest stadium footprints.

One of the first matters of business will be conducting a financial analysis to figure out how a project might be financed and to what extent the city might be involved. One possibility is some of the money for the project could come from selling or developing the city-owned 166-acre Qualcomm Stadium site, which the team would leave vacant.

Fabiani attended the Oct. 27 meeting between Sanders and Spanos with Kris Michell, Sanders' chief of staff, and Fred Maas, board chairman of the Centre City Development Corp., the city's downtown redevelopment arm.

The potential site is located entirely in the city's downtown redevelopment area, which may present financing opportunities because redevelopment law allows property tax dollars to be pumped back into an area in large sums. But it could mean competition with other projects for a limited pool of money.

Richard Rider, a longtime taxpayer advocate who ran for mayor in 2005 against Sanders, said the Chargers shouldn't count on any handout, including redevelopment bonds.

"I don't think the taxpayers are going to want to subsidize a new football stadium when we have a perfectly good football stadium more centrally located in Mission Valley," he said.

But Ben Haddad, board chairman at the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, is excited that Sanders and Spanos are again in regular contact.

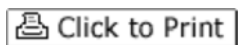
"If folks can agree at the highest levels on a particular course of action, then I want to be in there right behind them as a business leader trying to get that done," Haddad said.

Library researchers Anne Magill and Merrie Monteagudo contributed to this report.

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