SEATTLE ARENA FACES UPHILL CLIMB DESPITE CITY, COUNTY APPROVAL

Investor Chris Hansen Now Looks to Attract NBA Team

by Matthew Coller

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(Top) Fans at a pep rally showing their support for bringing an NBA team to Seattle; (Left) Businessman Chris Hansen is leading the charge.

It's been four years since the Seattle SuperSonics left the aging KeyArena for Oklahoma, and now a successful businessman is hoping to lure a team back to the Pacific Northwest with a new \$490-million arena.

In late September, the Seattle City Council and King County Council signed off on a plan to build a new arena with the aim of bringing the NBA back. After clearing the first hurdle, businessman Chris Hansen can begin his search to find an NBA team to move to Seattle.

"This is a journey," King County Councilmember Pete von Reichbauer said during the announcement of the new arena's approval. "We have not climbed the mountain. There are still plenty of challenges. But you have to build a strong foundation."

The challenges, however, are a much heavier burden for Hansen than the county or city. While \$200 million of public money is being used as a loan to the arena's investors, the funds will be paid back to the city over 32 years using taxes on arena revenues. Hansen is responsible for the rest.

He's also responsible for chasing down an NBA team.

"When the project first started, there were several teams on the radar screen," said Galen Trail, a Seattle University professor who has consulted on fan behavior for multiple major league sports teams. "There was Memphis and New Orleans, but now it appears they are staying put, and nobody knows what's going on with the Sacramento Kings. So I don't know if they will be able to get a team."

Another bump in the road to getting an NBA team might simply be competition. Seattle isn't the only city with the "if you build it, they will come" plan. There have been reports that the Kings may eventually move to Virginia Beach, Va., where media giant Comcast is looking to build a \$350-million arena. League Commissioner David Stern has also made it clear the NBA does not plan on expanding.

Even if Hansen does manage to woo an NBA team, it won't be easy to draw fans. Seattle is already a saturated sports market. The city features the National Football League's Seattle Seahawks, Major League Baseball's Seattle Mariners, Major League Soccer's Seattle Sounders, the WNBA's Seattle Storm and the popular University of Washington football and men's and women's basketball teams.

Trail said there are entertainment dollars "sitting on the sidelines" with the Mariners' severe drop in attendance since the early 2000s, but he noted that the NBA's overall attendance has dropped four years in a row.

"There's also the issue of corporate dollars," Trail said. "There are only so many corporations in Seattle who are spending on sports. It might be difficult to draw some of that money away from the other teams."

Despite the Sonics being moved, the NBA was successful in Seattle before. In the two seasons before their exit, the Sonics ranked ninth and 12th in the league in terms of average percentage of their arena filled. In 2006, they sold 94.9 percent of Key Arena while winning only 35 of 82 games.

"I do think if an NBA team comes, it would be supported and supported well by fans," Trail said.

That's if it comes. If not, the backup plan may be to aim for a National Hockey League team. Last month, Edmonton Oilers owner Daryl Katz visited Seattle to discuss the possibilities of a move after plans for a new arena in Edmonton fell through.

"There isn't as much buzz about the NHL at all," Trail said. "That concerns me. The NHL is an after-thought and it isn't like Chris Hansen is interested in an NHL team. He's saying that if someone wants to bring a team in and pay rent for the facility, he'll take it."

Trail said his research suggests the NHL will struggle in Seattle, projecting only around 10,000 fans per game after the "novelty wore off" in the first year or two. The lowest NHL attendance is currently the Phoenix Coyotes at just under 13,000.

The arena is still about a year away from breaking ground. A state-mandated environmental review is required to analyze the arena's effect on the area around its building site. Until then, basketball fans in Seattle will wait and hope Hansen can bring them back their Sonics.

"There are many miles to go and promises to keep," said Council Vice Chair Jane Hague during the announcement.

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