

SPORTS

D.C. Group Offers Padres \$150 Million, but No Sale

By Mark Maske
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Washington attorney Bart Fisher said yesterday that he's leading a group that has offered \$150 million to purchase the San Diego Padres. The group would move the baseball team to D.C. or Northern Virginia, Fisher said.

According to Fisher, the offer was made a month ago in a letter to Padres chairman and managing partner Tom Werner. However, Werner said last

night that he had no recollection of receiving such a letter and that the National League team is not for sale.

"I don't remember the letter," Werner said in a telephone interview. "That doesn't mean it wasn't sent. I don't take those kinds of letters seriously. I probably passed it on to someone. As I've said before, the team's not for sale. I'm happy someone thinks the team is worth that much money, but I've never talked to him."

Fisher said he's received no response from the Padres, just as he

received no response when he wrote to Werner in February to initially express an interest in buying the franchise.

Fisher, however, said he's hopeful that the situation could change with Thursday's ruling by a federal judge in Philadelphia rejecting Major League Baseball's long-standing exemption from antitrust laws as it relates to controlling the relocation of franchises.

"I am convinced that the reason they [the Padres] have not respond-

ed is because they're convinced they can't get approval [from the other major league owners] to move," Fisher said.

"We've always had this legal impediment, this barrier to entry," Fisher continued, referring to baseball's federal antitrust exemption, which has existed for 71 years and allows the owners to reject any proposed sale or relocation of a franchise if they choose. "If it's removed, it could help greatly. We could go af-

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ter existing franchises, and maybe not have to wait until baseball expands again. [Expansion] probably won't happen until 1995. We could snort-circuit that" if the antitrust exemption is overturned.

Fisher—the head of Capital Baseball Inc., which sought a team for the D.C. area when baseball last expanded—said he'd be joined in the Padres venture by William Bryant, a real estate developer and broker in Northern Virginia; Jim Valentine, an investment banker in Washington; D.C. attorney Paul Shiffman, and J. Morton Davis, a New York investment banker and the chairman of D.H. Blair Inc.

A baseball source confirmed that Fisher has made an offer for the Padres but could not confirm the price.

Major League Baseball officials seem impressed by Fisher's group, and apparently believe he would not have the same financing problems that plagued the previous D.C. expansion bid, led by John Akridge in 1991.

A \$150 million price tag would be the second-highest ever for a sports team. Baltimore attorney Peter Angelos is the leader of the group that on Monday in a New York bankruptcy court secured the right to purchase the Baltimore Orioles from Eli

Jacobs for \$173 million. The previous record for a sports franchise was the \$140 million Jerry Jones paid for the National Football League's Dallas Cowboys in 1989 (a deal that included Texas Stadium).

Until this week, the record sale price for a baseball franchise was the \$125 million a group of Japanese-led investors paid for the Seattle Mariners last year.

Baseball's first-year expansion teams, the Florida Marlins and Colorado Rockies, cost \$95 million apiece in 1991. A year earlier, Werner led a group that purchased the Padres for \$75 million.

The Padres have suffered operating losses of approximately \$20 million during the past two years, according to Richard Ravitch, the president of the Player Relations Committee and the owners' chief labor negotiator.

That's led the club's management to begin a salary-dumping campaign that has left the Padres with the lowest payroll in baseball.

No major league team has relocated since the Washington Senators became the Texas Rangers in 1972. A group of investors attempted to purchase the Giants for \$115 million last year and move them from San Francisco to Tampa-St. Petersburg, Fla., but the NL's owners rejected the sale. That has led to several lawsuits against Major League Baseball and renewed scrutiny from Congress of the game's antitrust exemption, which was granted by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1922.

One of the lawsuits was brought in Philadelphia by Pennsylvania businessmen Vincent Piazza and Vincent Tirendi, two of the rejected Florida investors. On Thursday, Judge John

Padova denied baseball's request to dismiss the suit. The judge ruled that the antitrust exemption applies only to players' contracts.

Pressure from the groups attacking the antitrust exemption may force baseball to expand again in the not-too-distant future. Baseball sources have said that Players Association Executive Director Donald Fehr, during the upcoming labor negotiations, will seek an agreement from the game's owners to expand again within a few years. Fehr will attempt to trade that agreement from the owners for the players' approval of the new playoff format, the sources have said. Fehr apparently will be seeking four new expansion teams within the next five years, but the owners may be reluctant to expand by more than two.

That could be troublesome for a D.C. expansion bid. The front-runners for new teams are thought to be Tampa-St. Petersburg and Phoenix. "I'd say Washington is a definite third" on the expansion list, one owner said yesterday. The owners insist that further expansion has not yet come up officially for consideration.

That's why Fisher and his cohorts are attempting to get an existing team. Fisher made an attempt to get the Giants before the Florida group became the leading suitor. Fisher said yesterday that he made an inquiry to the Pittsburgh Pirates this year. "The Pirates wrote back saying, 'You can buy the team, but you can't move it,'" Fisher said.

The proximity of Oriole Park at Camden Yards to Washington also is a factor in any D.C. bid for a baseball team—the major reason that Fisher likely would put the club in Northern Virginia. The Orioles have become one

of baseball's most profitable franchises since the second-year ballpark opened, and the other owners might be reluctant to put in a team that could cut into Baltimore's attendance. That's a factor in expansion, but it's only a factor in relocation as long as the antitrust exemption is intact.

Fisher said he sent a letter to Angelos this week congratulating him on acquiring the Orioles, and expressing the hope that the two sides can have an amiable relationship as Fisher's group continues to pursue a team.



BART FISHER

... leads group seeking team.