

Fisher steps up to the plate for Fairfax County

By Todd Behrendt

Staff writer

While the rest of us were pledging to lose weight or stop smoking in 1994, Great Falls attorney Bart Fisher was making a New Year's resolution of a different sort.

"My New Year's resolution is to bring baseball to Washington, D.C. in 1994," he said. "Any way I can do it."

Fisher is the president of Capital Baseball Inc., a group of five private investors who have been trying to return baseball to the metropolitan D.C. area since 1990.

The group failed that year to land one of the coveted expansion franchises. Fisher was also unsuccessful in luring the Giants to D.C. in 1992, when owner Bob Lurie was looking to leave San Francisco.

Now Fisher has set his sights on the San Diego Padres, a club in obvious financial trouble. The team has spent the better part of the last two seasons shipping off players with big salaries in order to cut costs.

"They're losing \$8 to \$10 million a year," Fisher said. "They're hemorrhaging red ink. I think they should want to sell."

Hardly the picture of a solid investment, you say? Fisher would disagree.

"I think it's a good business," he said. "You have to analyze it in terms of the market you're in. San Diego is not a good market. Now, San Diego in this market makes \$10 million a year if you know what you're doing."

To date, however, the Padres' ownership has indicated that they are not interested in selling the beleaguered team. Not that Fisher is giving up on someday obtaining the Padres.

"A year ago, Eli Jacobs said he wasn't going to sell the Baltimore Orioles and you saw what happened there," Fisher said. "You've got to be persistent and stay after these guys. You never know when lightning will strike. You want to be there when it does."

Relocation may also be made easier if Congress decides to repeal baseball's antitrust exemption, which has made moving franchises difficult.

The problem with having the antitrust

status in limbo is that a would-be seller doesn't know if the acting commissioner will prevent the transaction from taking place," Fisher said. "It will make it much easier to purchase a team for relocation if the antitrust exemption were removed."

Which is why Fisher has continued to operate Capital Baseball (in addition to being a partner with Patton, Boggs & Blow) even after the group failed in its bid to receive an expansion team in 1990.

According to Fisher, lightning may strike as soon as 1995, in the form of another round of expansion. "I think baseball will expand," he said. "I think they'll add four teams, two in '95 and two more in '99."

The success of the Colorado Rockies and the Florida Marlins has made expansion a more attractive option for baseball.

"It [the success of the two expansion teams] removes the argument that expansion is not good for baseball," Fisher said. "The argument used to be that expansion would somehow dilute the interest in baseball or the quality of the game. In fact, baseball attendance was up 25% last year and half of that increase was in the expansion teams."

Should baseball choose to expand again, Northern Virginia would be a logical choice. It is part of the seventh largest media market in the country and it is the lone top ten media market not to have a professional baseball team.

But would it be a money-maker? Hurt by escalating salaries and diminishing television revenues, baseball owners have reported record losses despite increases in attendance.

An independent consultant reported to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors that on

its own, a stadium is not a money winner.

That's not what Fisher and his investors have in mind, though.

"That's never what we advocated," he said. "We want to be part of something bigger, like a sports complex or a convention center. An entity that has hotels or restaurants."

Now that Jack Kent Cooke appears resolved to move the Redskins out of the District, the possibility of a major sports complex encompassing major league baseball and the N.F.L. intrigues Fisher.

As does Fairfax County. Should Capital Baseball succeed in bringing major league baseball to Washington, Fairfax County is at the top of Fisher's list for prospective stadium sites.

"I think Fairfax County would be an excellent site," he said. "We're very hopeful the county will provide the land for the site."

If baseball is to expand again (although official reports from major league baseball indicate that, contrary to Fisher's beliefs, the league is not planning to expand in 1995), Fisher is undoubtedly the man to bring it to Fairfax County. He is, in his own words, "not a jock, but a fan."

Franchise ownership is in his blood, as his family owned three different teams (the old St. Louis Browns, the Chicago White Sox and the Cleveland Indians).

Fisher has passed the love of the game with his only son, Ross. "It's definitely a bonding thing between father and son," he said. "Baseball is a real family thing."

While Fisher was growing up in St. Louis, baseball was definitely on everybody's mind.

"Baseball is the biggest thing in St. Louis," he said. "It's like the Redskins are here. We owned the team that owned the town."

Fisher's upbringing will undoubtedly serve him well in his quest to bring baseball to Fairfax County.

"I probably have as much business knowledge from growing up as anyone," he said. "I know the business of baseball and I feel this would be both civically important and financially rewarding."