

Baseball mogul pitching

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Major league baseball in Fairfax County is still only a dream. But Bart S. Fisher is already pitching.

Fisher, who heads a group of investors looking to bring big league baseball to the Washington area, yesterday announced a drive for the corporate sponsors he says are key to convincing Major League Baseball to award a team to the area.

His group, Capital Baseball Inc., is looking for companies willing to spend as much as \$2 million to buy exclusive rights to television, radio and billboard advertising for everything from beer to petroleum products.

To lead that drive, the investor group has hired Arnold Fortuna Lawner & Cabot Inc. — more commonly known as Arnold Advertising — of Tysons Cor-

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ner, an agency chosen in part for its client list and in part for its sports experience.

Arnold Advertising has done work for such local names as Mobil Corp. near Merrifield, McArthur/Glen Realty Corp. in Tysons Corner, and Chevy Chase Federal Savings Bank in Maryland. It will look first to its clients, then to Fortune 500 companies based in the Washington area and the state of Virginia, then to Fortune 500 companies elsewhere.

In addition, Arnold Advertising's Boston-based parent company is working for the National Hockey League. And the president of the Tysons Corner office, Peter C. Hanley, before joining the company in November purchased corporate sponsorships in the World Series, the Super Bowl, the collegiate basketball "Final Four" and other major sports events.

Arnold has not yet signed on any companies and has made no formal presentations to pitch the idea. Formal presentations will begin Monday, though Fisher would not say with whom.

Arnold Advertising will be negotiating exclusive sponsorship packages over the next few months with companies that sell everything from candy to transportation and from sportswear to breakfast foods.

Interested companies will specify the level of sponsorship they want and then pay a non-refundable deposit, which will be in the "thousands of dollars" for the right of first refusal. A beer company that signs on now, for example, will have first shot at being the only beer-industry sponsors if the team is awarded.

Corporate packages, which will range from \$25,000 to \$2 million, would include such options as advertising, exclusive product sales at a stadium, sky boxes, merchandising, scoreboard ownership, team sponsorship and privileged parking, among others — depending on the level of sponsorship.

All of this is occurring without any guarantee Major League Baseball will even add a fran-

chise. Baseball officials deny any plans for league expansion.

But Fisher said he is sure it will occur. "We have received indications that within the very near future, Major League Baseball will expand by adding four new franchises," Fisher said. "The truth is, in terms of demographics, the strength of the ownership group, and potential profitability, the Washington, D.C., area is the natural for baseball expansion."

Finding sponsors is only one of several steps toward attracting a franchise, the most obvious of which is finding a stadium. Fisher has spoken with officials in Washington but prefers Northern Virginia, which is further away from the Baltimore Orioles.

Fisher also has spoken with officials in Loudoun and Prince William counties, but he says he prefers to find a site in Fairfax, with its high median family income and the support of Thomas M. Davis III, Fisher's friend, fellow baseball enthusiast and chairman of the county Board of Supervisors.

The county is looking for a site to build a stadium, likely to cost \$125 million to \$150 million, excluding land. Davis, who spoke at the press conference yesterday, declined to specify sites under consideration. But in the past, he has mentioned the Dulles corridor and the Engineer Proving Grounds off Backlick Road near the Newington exchange of Interstate 95.

Fisher said such stadiums are typically a "private-public partnership," which means the private sector pays for the baseball franchise and government finances stadium construction.

Davis said he is not set on that arrangement. But he said one financing option is to issue revenue bonds, which would be repaid from stadium income, such as parking fees and taxes on tickets and concessions, and which would require no general fund money.

In addition, Fisher noted the General Assembly passed a measure in 1992 creating a baseball stadium authority, which would be able to issue bonds to pay for stadiums.