

A's News Clips, Monday, December 19, 2011

Leaving A's not an easy choice for Willingham

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- More sighs from the Oakland faithful were likely heard this week, when free-agent outfielder Josh Willingham officially signed with a team not named the A's.

Willingham, who agreed to a three-year deal with the Twins for \$21 million -- he'll make \$1 million more per season than he did with the A's this year -- represents the second of Oakland's free agents to depart the Bay Area, as David DeJesus joined the Cubs a couple of weeks ago.

Fellow outfielder Coco Crisp is likely to follow, leaving the outfield a top priority for an A's team that's suddenly staring down a rebuild. It's not so much a friendly scene for fans right now, nor was it the preferential path in the eyes of Willingham, who on Friday said he hoped to stay in Oakland if awarded a long-term contract.

Such a deal was discussed in August and September, Willingham said, but increasingly became less of a reality at season's end.

"Talks of an extension were there for a while," Willingham told MLB.com by phone from his Alabama home. "But I can say [A's general manager] Billy Beane's always been real honest with me, and he didn't know what they were going to do, so he pretty much told me they were going to offer me a one-year arbitration contract and that was probably going to be it."

They did, and as a result of Willingham's signing with the Twins, will get a supplemental pick after the first round of next year's First-Year Player Draft as compensation, as well as a pick in front of Minnesota high in the second round. Normally the latter would come in front of the first-round pick, but the first 15 picks are protected and the Twins are slated to choose second overall.

Willingham noted there were four teams "seriously interested" in his services at the time of his decision. The A's, obviously, weren't included in that mix, but Minnesota proved quite the attractive landing spot for the outfielder, who last year compiled a career-high 29 home runs and 98 RBIs.

"Having a three-year deal, that was big for me," he said. "And you look at a lot of other factors, as well. It's in the Midwest, so it's closer to home and will be easier on family. You look at the organization, and I've talked with plenty of players who have played there, and there wasn't a bad thing said about it. All of that kind of plays into a decision."

Still, he feels for the teammates he leaves behind in Oakland, where there remains plenty of questions about the future. Right-hander Trevor Cahill and lefty Craig Breslow have already been dealt, and Gio Gonzalez and Andrew Bailey could be traded shortly, as well -- all for prospects the A's hope will field a new stadium that's yet to garner approval.

Anti-A's group, backed by San Francisco Giants, hard to pin down

By Tracy Seipel, San Jose Mercury News

Its website features the American flag and a playful photograph of an attractive, beaming young family below the words "Stand for San Jose."

There are no names, no phone numbers. The only thing clear about the group, represented by a San Francisco political consultant and a law firm that has worked for the San Francisco Giants for nearly two decades, is its mission: Stop the Oakland A's from moving to San Jose.

Although San Francisco Giants officials acknowledge they support the group, exactly who else is behind Stand for San Jose and who's bankrolling it is far from clear. In fact, a San Jose woman who sued the city this month over the proposed stadium -- the only person who was initially named as a plaintiff along with Stand for San Jose -- is uncomfortable about suddenly being thrust into the spotlight.

"I didn't know my name was going on that," Eileen Hannan told this newspaper when first asked about the 36-page suit filed two weeks ago, though her signature appears on the document. "I'm leery of talking to anybody about it."

Hannan, a 52-year-old receptionist at a San Jose commercial real estate firm, isn't alone.

It's not easy to find members of Stand for San Jose who are willing to speak openly about the lawsuit. Five more names were recently added to the lawsuit; of those people, only one returned a phone call from this newspaper, while the fifth could not be located. And Dan Newman, the group's political consultant, refused to say how many members the group has.

The lawsuit seeks to stop plans for the ballpark based on what it says are inadequate environmental and traffic studies. In addition, the suit claims that the City Council violated a San Jose law when it agreed to give A's co-owner Lew Wolff an option to buy the land at a bargain price if he builds a ballpark there.

The group believes voters should have had the right to approve the option because it means that Wolff might get to purchase city-owned land valued at \$13.9 million for \$6.9 million.

San Jose city officials said they expected the lawsuit and are unimpressed with its claims. And, they added, they see right through the group's hidden agenda.

"Any time a group of San Francisco lawyers funded by a group of San Francisco millionaires calls themselves Stand for San Jose, we should brace ourselves for whatever comes next," said San Jose City Councilman Sam Liccardo, who added that it was obvious that the San Francisco Giants are the main players behind the suit.

Giants spokeswoman Staci Slaughter called Liccardo's comment "a false characterization of the group."

She acknowledged that "part of it is supported by the San Jose Giants and the San Francisco Giants." But, she said, "it also represents other citizens who are concerned about the issues at hand."

Stand for San Jose first came to light in December 2009, when it billed itself as a group of fans of the San Jose Giants, the San Francisco Giants' Class A minor league team. At the time, it said that it was formed to oppose public funds or subsidies that would bring the A's to San Jose, whose territorial rights are owned by the San Francisco Giants.

Not long afterward, the group sent a letter to San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed demanding that if the projected economic benefits of a downtown ballpark outlined in a 2009 ballpark economic analysis didn't pan out, the A's should make up the difference between the actual and projected figures. The group has also challenged the city's environmental impact report for the proposed ballpark, which would be built near Diridon Station.

Then, for almost 18 months, Stand for San Jose seemed to go dark.

On Dec. 2, however, it surfaced to meet a legal filing deadline. The group outlined its updated strategy in the lawsuit, which was drawn up by Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, the San Francisco law firm that worked with the Giants to make AT&T Park a reality.

"It's clearly a setup to try to stall the project and delay the project in hopes that Major League Baseball will say no," Reed said. "I think MLB will look at the merits and the facts and say yes."

A decision by MLB commissioner Bud Selig on whether the A's can relocate to San Jose is expected early next year. It would then have to be approved by three-quarters of MLB's owners.

Reed and other city officials say that Wolff is prepared to buy the land and pay for the stadium. So, they contend, Stand for San Jose has now been forced to rework its arguments.

In its suit, the group cites deficiencies in the environmental impact report and traffic plan linked to the ballpark site, which it believes should be developed into housing and office space. And the suit criticizes the city for not allowing the public to vote on its agreement to allow Wolff to buy land at below-market value.

But City Attorney Rick Doyle said there is nothing in the city's municipal code that requires San Jose voters to approve giving Wolff the land option. Doyle said a public vote, however, will be required as a condition of Wolff's exercise of the option. And Liccardo stipulated as much in a motion before a council vote last month on the option agreement.

But Newman said that a majority of San Jose residents share the group's concerns about "an undemocratic, underexamined, illegal land giveaway." He also said the reason the group is keeping its membership list private is because its members have been harassed.

Among the five new plaintiffs recently added to the lawsuit is attorney Michelle Brenot, who said she's been a Stand for San Jose member for a year and a half.

Brenot, a San Jose resident, said she is not a Major League Baseball fan, but is a San Jose Giants fan who, like Hannan, doesn't want to lose affordable family entertainment -- which they fear would happen if the A's move to San Jose.

The attorney also said she opposes new retail shops that she understands would be located adjacent to the ballpark because the new stores "will pull people away from the downtown retail that already exists."

Those who know Hannan, who works at the Cassidy Turley commercial real estate firm at San Jose's Santana Row, say she's a die-hard San Francisco Giants fan and avid support of the San Jose Giants. But her bosses in the San Jose office, while acknowledging Hannan's right to her opinions, adamantly disagree with her.

"As a company, especially as it relates to our clients, we support moving the A's to San Jose," said Erik Hallgrimson, a partner at the firm.

The proposed ballpark, he added, "would be an incredible incentive to bringing more business to downtown San Jose."