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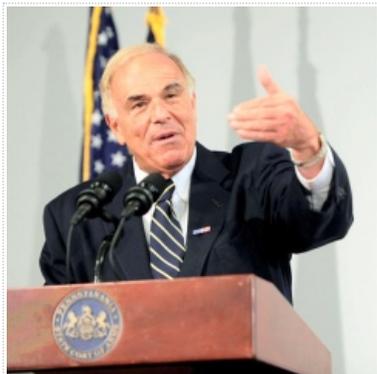
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Rendell playing active role in potential sale of baseball franchise

BY CHARLES SCHILLINGER (STAFF WRITER)
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Rendell

Gov. Ed Rendell confirmed he participated by phone in a June meeting between Lackawanna County majority commissioners and representatives of Mandalay Baseball Properties and the New York Yankees in which the governor made a pitch in favor of the sale of the region's Triple-A baseball franchise.

The governor said Wednesday morning in Scranton he supported a potential sale because it provided a match to a \$20 million commitment the state is willing to make. The potential sale would also put the baseball franchise in the hands of private business, where he said he believes it belongs.

Commissioners Mike Washo and Corey O'Brien acknowledged the New York City meeting Wednesday afternoon. County spokeswoman Lynne Shedlock said called it an introductory meeting between the county, Yankees and Mandalay "prior to starting a conversation on the future of baseball."

"The commissioners were unaware of what the governor was going to say prior to his phone call," said county spokeswoman Lynne Shedlock.

While the commissioners have declined to comment beyond referring questions to Mrs. Shedlock, minority Commissioner A.J. Munchak said Mr. Washo told him he was "surprised" by the governor's participation. Mr. Munchak was invited to attend the meeting, but declined.

It's unclear who asked the governor to phone in to the June 16 meeting. Mr. Rendell couldn't recall, a spokesman said later Wednesday.

"I have to assume it was someone from the Yankees who had him call," Mr. Munchak said.

Efforts to reach Art Matin, president and CEO of Mandalay, were unsuccessful.

The pitch indicates the governor has played an active role in convincing local officials to not fight the possible sale of the franchise and to build a new stadium to keep baseball, and the New York Yankees minor league team, in Lackawanna County.

"I hate the Yankees," said Mr. Rendell, a Chicago White Sox and Philadelphia Phillies fan. "If we're going to have minor league baseball in Pennsylvania, why not have the best brand? The Yankees are the No. 1 brand. Let's keep them here."

The current owners of the franchise and PNC Field, the Lackawanna County Multi-Purpose Stadium Authority, are mulling an offer from former board member and solicitor John McGee, who urged the authority board to challenge the right Mandalay has to purchase the franchise. He offered to raise money for a legal fund if the authority commits to a challenge.

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"Selling the franchise is not in the best interests of the people of Lackawanna County," said Mr. McGee, who is pitching his own plan that includes keeping the franchise, but selling the management rights to help fund stadium renovations. "The sale of the franchise means, at some point, you're selling the ability to relocate the team to another community."

The 2007 purchase option, signed by former county Commissioner Robert C. Cordaro, allows Mandalay to buy the baseball franchise for between \$13 million and \$16 million, depending on when the purchase is made. The option requires Mandalay to sign a 20-year lease at the local stadium if the option is exercised though some, including Mr. McGee, say there is no safeguard keeping the franchise from being moved.

Asked about a challenge to the team's sale, Mr. Rendell said it is time for local officials to move on.

"That ship has sailed. Whoever it was that made the contract with the Yankees, they decided that. And by the way, I don't think municipal governments ... should be in business of owning a sports team any more than they should own a bridge repair company," Mr. Rendell, who was in Scranton to speak about the state's roads and bridges in disrepair. "They don't know how to do it."

A reporter pointed out the Green Bay Packers are publicly owned and they manage it.

"Yeah, but Harrisburg didn't do so well. Harrisburg is a good parallel," Mr. Rendell said.

The state's capital city sold its double-A franchise, the Harrisburg Senators, to private investors for \$13.25 million in 2007 - \$250,000 more than Lackawanna County will get if it sells its more lucrative triple-A franchise this year. Mr. Rendell pointed to how Harrisburg was able to completely remake the stadium for its double-A franchise, the Harrisburg Senators, with a similar commitment from the state that Mr. Rendell is offering to Scranton.

Since at least November, Mr. Washo and Mr. O'Brien have said they envisioned a complete remake of PNC Field but they said last week that county taxpayers shouldn't pay for it.

They have repeatedly refused to speculate on how they would pay for a stadium remake, on a \$20 million commitment Mr. Rendell has offered and whether they wanted to challenge the sale of the franchise.

Though they have said there have been discussions with Mandalay and Yankees officials, Wednesday was the first time it was publicly confirmed the majority commissioners sat down with them in a Yankees board room in New York.

"They did not negotiate or deliberate on any specific terms. There was agreement that the lawyers would get together and discuss specific terms at a later date," Mrs. Shedlock said. "They felt it was important to put faces to names prior to starting a conversation on the future of baseball."

Mr. Rendell has taken flak for offering to make \$20 million available to renovate PNC Field. In comments to Capitolwire.com, an online news agency, state Rep. Jerry Knowles, R-124, Tamaqua said it was "outrageous" the governor is spending \$20 million for a baseball stadium while Pennsylvania is facing a \$1 billion deficit.

In response Wednesday, the governor pointed to the economic benefit a baseball stadium provides - and that the state commitment would be from the Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program.

"It's shocking to me that legislators don't understand the difference between operating money and capital money," Mr. Rendell said. "There's no money in the capital budget that can be used to defray operating costs. There's none. It's illegal. He should go back to school."

Mr. Knowles said Wednesday he prefers to "live in the real world, not the Rendell world."

"I certainly know the difference between operating dollars and capital dollars - its all taxpayer money," he said.

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