

Fowler's group has North County on tap

North County Times JAY PARIS, STAFF WRITER

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Hey North County, this six-pack is for you. As in six potential sites the Chargers could one day call home. That's according to Ron Fowler, the president of Liquid Investments, who's heading a committee to find a replacement for Qualcomm Stadium. His group, which meets again July 15, has narrowed an extensive list of potential venue locations to seven.

One is a San Diego spot other than Qualcomm Stadium, with the balance in North County.

"A location outside of San Diego might lend itself to a site where there would be sufficient space for stadium and parking, and ancillary development," Fowler said. "What we are doing is pursuing seven locations. We are going down the road with those, then we'll probably check back with San Diego and the Chargers.

"Hopefully, San Diego and the Chargers can move forward. But if not, we can get some decent leg work done on other locations."

Fowler isn't affiliated with the city's emerging 15-member task force formed to consider the city's options in retaining its NFL team. He's also not connected with the Chargers' brain trust, which is exploring ways to fund a new stadium.

But Fowler's group of businessmen and community leaders ---- which hired stadium consultants with their own money ---- can't be easily discounted.

Fowler, the former owner of the San Diego Sockers, is a serious mover and shaker in San Diego sports circles.

Fowler is the San Diego Super Bowl XXXVII Host Committee chairman and founder of the San Diego International Sports Council. His resume includes being the ex-treasurer and trustee of the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista.

Fowler wouldn't name others on his panel, but it's undoubtedly a group of heavy-hitters.

"I think they've brought together some of the best minds in the city," said Mark Fabiani, who's spearheading the Chargers' quest for a fresh home.

"These people have worked on similar projects here in San Diego and outside the city. This is what we need: smart people thinking out these things.

"This shows a strong commitment by key business leaders that pro football is important and the Super Bowl is important. These are people whose businesses depend on tourism and a healthy economy, so they made a decision to spend their own resources on something that is important for their businesses."

Fowler's Mesa Distributing makes sure beer flows smoothly at the "Q." And he doesn't want San Diego to fall flat in its bid to retain the Chargers.

"I was around for a lot of other things in this town ---- I was on the first task force related to the Padres' new ballpark," Fowler said. "And I typically saw the knee-jerk reaction on that: 'It can't be done, we can't use public money, no location makes sense.' I've heard all of this.

"So we wanted to see if there are some things that we can do that make sense, and we have a group of people banded together informally.

"We have to make sure all options are pursued, and we are just wanting to make sure of that if things don't work out between the city and the Chargers."

Fowler declined to cite specific stadium sites. He did say his group hasn't contacted any of the cities, or the county of San Diego, regarding attractive locations.

"We don't want to be perceived as getting in the way of the city and the Chargers getting something done here," Fowler said. "If they can get something done in the existing location, fine. If not, we'll have some work done and it will be available to the various parties to look at."

When Fabiani was informed all but one potential stadium site has North County roots, he wasn't startled.

"I'm not surprised to hear that," he said. "I think North County has a lot going for it in terms of available land, proximity to Orange County, Riverside and San Bernardino. There is a huge fan base there that would probably not come to downtown, that would come to the North County.

"People are used to coming to the (Del Mar) race track and if you tap into that fan base, that's a pretty significant and wealthy fan base."

Added Fowler: "We're looking at North County cities along the major arteries ---- Interstate 5 and 15. Places that you can get to fairly (easily).

"I also think one of the issues driving this, from the Chargers' standpoint, is they want to broaden their fan base to the region of south Orange County and Riverside. With that, some locations in North San Diego County make a lot of sense."

Fowler is confident the Chargers will be able to trigger their escape clause on Dec. 1, which could allow them to flee the "Q" after the 2003 season. While discussions of moving to Los Angeles have diminished of late, Fowler said another locale could snatch the Bolts. Just like what happened when the Browns, Cardinals and Oilers vacated their longtime homes.

"What motivated our loose coalition to do this is we saw the situation in Cleveland, we looked at the situation in St. Louis, in Houston. And the cost of getting a new team compared to keeping an existing franchise ---- it's a no-brainer. We don't want to complete this process and then be without NFL football, then try to bring it back.

"Football is very good for San Diego and having a stadium here is critical. Not only for the Chargers, but for Super Bowls, the Holiday Bowls, Aztecs. You add all that up and it is a significant reason why we should have a first-class facility versus what we have."

Fowler said holding Super Bowls ---- the "Q" will host its third and final one in January - --- is difficult to ignore.

"If we had a first-class facility, we would be the West Coast destination of choice and have it every five or six years," Fowler said.

"Pricewaterhouse's study on the '98 Super Bowl showed it had a \$125 million impact, and a secondary impact which raised it to \$295 million. No way we would have anything close to that kind of an impact at that time of the year."

At some time, according to Fowler's studies, North County could be the leading candidate to house the Chargers.

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