

NHL'S FUTURE IN PITTSBURGH UNCERTAIN

KC group continues pursuit of Penguins

By RANDY COVITZ
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Paul McGannon, president of NHL21, the group dedicated to attracting a National Hockey League franchise to Kansas City, mixed business with pleasure on Tuesday night.

McGannon attended the Pittsburgh Penguins' game at St. Louis as a fan, but he also intended to meet with Penguins officials, including player-owner Mario Lemieux, who said last weekend that there is only "a slim chance" the franchise will remain in Pittsburgh after its lease at outdated Mellon Arena expires after the 2006-07 season.

The new 18,500-seat Sprint Center in downtown Kansas City is scheduled to open in the fall of 2007, and Tim Leiweke, president of Anschutz Entertainment Group, which will operate the arena, said last month: "If Pittsburgh doesn't have an arena deal done a year from now, they're gone. The Pittsburgh Penguins can be the Kansas City Penguins, no question about it."

McGannon, who has met with Penguins officials at previous NHL functions, planned to give Lemieux, vice president/general manager Craig Patrick and assistant general manager Ed Johnston an update on the Sprint Center, which already has sold out its available suites, before they head to the league's Board of Governors meetings this week in Scottsdale, Ariz.

"The good news now is we've moved to the next level as far as being a viable option because of the very good pre-sale of the suites," McGannon said. "Whenever you have a St. Louis or Pittsburgh situation with ownership change or ownership concerns, we'd like to make sure they know that Kansas City is there for them if they desire that to be an option."

Although the Blues have been put on the market by owners Bill and Nancy Laurie of Columbia, the chances of that club relocating are slim because of a long-term lease and debt service with Savvis Center that a buyer would inherit.

Besides, McGannon said, "Kansas City won't work without St. Louis in the NHL. We must have the rivalry. There has been talk that if Pittsburgh ever moved to Kansas City, then Detroit would move to the Eastern Conference, and that would allow for much better travel for the teams in both conferences.

"The big feather in Kansas City's hat is not only the building and the sold-out suites, but you have six NHL cities within an hour or so flight. They like the geography and civic interest and the business side because the first anchor tenant in is going to get a windfall from these suites."

The Penguins' lease at Mellon Arena allows the club to solicit offers for the franchise beginning in June 2006, one year before the lease is up. Other cities expected to show interest in the Penguins include Houston; Portland, Ore.; and Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The Penguins are trying to obtain a license to operate a downtown slot-machine parlor and would put proceeds from that operation into construction of a new building. But there is no guarantee when — or whether — the Penguins would be awarded the license.

A still-unanswered question is whether Lemieux would move the club and operate it in another city or just sell it. Though the Penguins, 8-17-4-2 after Tuesday's 3-0 loss, are off to a slow start this season, they have one of the game's brightest young stars in rookie Sidney Crosby, the No. 1 pick in the 2005 draft.

"It will be whatever Mario and the NHL want to do, and we're here to help them in whatever direction they decide," said McGannon, who has reserved Sept. 30, 2006, for his organization's next NHL preseason game at Kemper Arena.

"They know of the interest here. They know of the success of the preseason games here. They know of the sold-out suites here. They know Tim Leiweke and AEG, and if the phone rings, they're going to answer it."

To reach Randy Covitz, sports reporter for The Star, call (816) 234-4796 or send e-mail to rcovitz@kcstar.com