

JOHN O'CONNOR TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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Before a Class AA franchise in Connecticut can be moved to Richmond, Minor League Baseball says it wants to see firm evidence that the city will get a new ballpark.

Tim Purpura, Minor League Baseball's executive vice president, said this week that the organization, which oversees all minor leagues affiliated with Major League Baseball, wants a sense of "what commitment is made by the municipalities involved, and some rudimentary idea of the leasing arrangements" before allowing relocation.

A group of Richmond investors is working to acquire the Class AA Eastern League franchise in Norwich, Conn., and move it to Richmond for the 2010 season. However, a \$60 million ballpark -- proposed by Highwoods Properties as part of a \$363 million development, Shockoe Center -- has not been approved by the city.

The Eastern League president, Joe McEacharn, said a relocation application must be submitted by August for an Eastern League franchise to be in a new locale for 2010. The August deadline is for scheduling, marketing and sales purposes, he said.

"At the present time, we have no relocation applications submitted to us," McEacharn said. "If a relocation application were to be filed, and I want to reiterate that none has been, the facility, as well as lease terms and long-term viability are all factors that are investigated and reviewed, prior to making any decisions on relocation applications."

The league's timetable coincides with an Aug. 1 deadline for Mayor Dwight C. Jones' administration to sign a letter of intent to move forward with the Shockoe Center development. City officials continue to study the proposal and are planning to hire a consultant to review the project's finances and other aspects, said Tammy Hawley, Jones' press secretary.

The House of Delegates and the state Senate have voted to approve House Bill 1803, proposed by Del. G. Manoli Loupassi, R-Richmond, which would use a portion of sales-tax proceeds to pay for a Richmond ballpark that's part of Shockoe Center.

The legislation would designate 2.5 percent of the sales-tax collections derived from the stadium -- and the development it spawns -- toward paying the bonds to finance the construction.

A companion bill, Senate Bill 1021, sponsored by Sen. A. Donald McEachin, D-Henrico, has passed the Senate and now is in committee.

A group of Shockoe Slip business owners has asked lawmakers to refer the bills back to committee out of concern that they might allow private facilities to be financed with public bonds.

"At a time when our economy is in a major recession, tax dollars should not be spent to fund the so-called private facilities," the group wrote in a letter to lawmakers. "In addition, private business in the city should not be placed at a disadvantage due to a special financing vehicle provided by the commonwealth."

The group includes representatives of The Tobacco Company Restaurant, the Omni Richmond Hotel, Richbrau Brewing Company, and Sam Miller's Restaurant.

Several sources identified the Norwich franchise as the one Richmond Baseball Club LC is attempting to purchase for about \$15 million. If the deal is completed next month as expected, Richmond Baseball Club LC would operate the franchise in Norwich this season with the intention of moving it to Richmond for 2010.

"Certainly the Eastern League has significant interest in the Richmond market," the Eastern League's McEacharn said. "It was host for a Triple-A team [the Richmond Braves] -- a very successful one for a number of years. It's got great demographics."

There are no Class AAA franchises for sale in the International League, which is why the Richmond investment group is targeting Class AA.

"There's a reason there are no Triple-A teams available," said Bryan Bostic, chairman of the Richmond group. "The reason is they have [new ballparks]. We don't."

A Class AA franchise sale to Bostic's group could be announced soon after Minor League Baseball secures a Class A franchise for Norwich. That franchise would start play in Norwich in 2010, so that community would have uninterrupted professional baseball.

The Class AA franchise in Norwich is affiliated with the San Francisco Giants in an agreement that extends through the 2010 season.

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Contact John O'Connor at (804) 649-6233 or [joconnor@timesdispatch.com](mailto:joconnor@timesdispatch.com) .

Staff writer Will Jones and Politics Editor Andrew Cain contributed to this report.