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## Investors announce plan to bring WNBA to Tulsa

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TULSA, Okla. -- A group of investors unveiled plans Wednesday to bring a WNBA franchise to Tulsa, even as the league president warned that there is a Sept. 1 deadline to firm things up for the beginning of the 2010 season.

"Tulsa is certainly well down the road in terms of their diligence and exploratory work necessary to bring a franchise," WNBA President Donna Orender told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. "The WNBA is an equal-opportunity league.

"I would say to Tulsa, 'What's the size of your heart? Are you willing to stand behind the things that the city says are important?'" said Orender, who was in town meeting with potential investors.

Tulsa, with about 385,000 people, would be the second-smallest city with a WNBA franchise - after Uncasville, Conn. Orender said other cities were being considered by the WNBA, but did not reveal which ones were in the running.

It was unknown whether Tulsa would be an expansion team or if an existing team would relocate here, but officials expressed confidence in the city's ability to support a major-league team. The investment group did not discuss how much capital had been raised so far.

The WNBA began play in 1997 and has been the most stable women's pro basketball league in the U.S., thanks in good part to its connection with the NBA. But it has struggled at times, with franchises in Miami, Portland, Cleveland, Charlotte and Houston ceasing operations over the years. Franchises in Orlando and Utah also have relocated.

Rosters have been trimmed from 13 to 11 this season because of the economic downturn and coaching staffs have been cut by one full-time assistant for all teams. But attendance last year rose for a second straight season and is up again so far this year. Merchandise sales also are up.

The Tulsa plan was announced at the downtown BOK Center, a venue that holds about 18,000 and would be the team's home.

Two of the major investors are Oklahoma City businessmen Bill Cameron and David Box, who also are members of the ownership group of the Tulsa Talons of arenafootball2.

Cameron also is part of the ownership group of the NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder. That group bought the then-Seattle SuperSonics and the WNBA's Seattle Storm in July 2006, but sold the WNBA franchise to Seattle investors before moving the NBA franchise to Oklahoma City last year.

"To say this is exciting is an understatement," Cameron said. "Momentum is building. The WNBA is behind us and city and business leaders are lining up to lend their support."

The WNBA has 13 teams and all but two (Seattle and Connecticut) play in the same city as their NBA counterparts. Nearly half the teams - Atlanta, Chicago, Connecticut, Los Angeles, Seattle and Washington - have non-NBA owners.

"Bill is an excellent partner in the Thunder ownership group," Clay Bennett, the chairman of the Thunder ownership group, said in a statement. "His support for our organization has always been valued. We wish him and his investors only the very best in their efforts to bring the WNBA to Tulsa."