

WNBA

WNBA has fan base to build on

BY ANDREA COHEN

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TULSA — Two years ago, 13,611 women's basketball fans — the most in state history — gathered in Gallagher-Iba Arena to watch Oklahoma and Oklahoma State play.

Sooner women's basketball regularly draws nearly 10,000 fans, one of the nation's best attendance averages. Recent Big 12 Tournaments and NCAA Regionals in Oklahoma City have been well attended.

A group of investors says it can capitalize on those fan bases and develop an even bigger fan base of its own in bringing a WNBA team to Tulsa. With a backdrop stating: "Tulsa, A Major League City," investors held a news conference Wednesday afternoon to drum up interest and additional financial

TEAM WOULD BE EXPANSION

The question of where exactly Tulsa's potential WNBA team would come from was put off by most investors, spokespeople and WNBA president Donna Orender.

But Wednesday afternoon, investor David Box said Tulsa will not be relocating one of the 13 existing WNBA teams.

"This is an expansion team," Box told The Oklahoman. "It's going to be a brand new team."

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WNBA: College success will help effort

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backing for bringing a franchise to the state's second-largest city. The group is trying to meet a Sept. 1 deadline to have money raised and a lease agreement with the BOK Center to get the team in place for next season. No specific amounts were given, but the Tulsa World estimates a price tag between \$6 million and \$10 million.

While the investors and other speakers, including Tulsa mayor Kathy Taylor, emphasized how beneficial the team would be for Tulsa, a more statewide vision was used to explain how the team could succeed.

One of the key reasons given was that a Tulsa team would be a complement and not a competitor to the Sooners and Cowgirls.

"We're not playing in their season, so we won't be competing with them," said David Box, who, along with Bill Cameron, is leading the charge to bring a WNBA team to Tulsa. "I think their fan bases are



Former OU standout Ashley Paris was at Tuesday's announcement in Tulsa.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN HOLMAN, TULSA WORLD

going to help us, and hopefully, we'll be able to gain our own fans."

The WNBA season runs from May through September. Cameron said he's hopeful the WNBA will create new women's basketball fans.

"I think we'll develop our own fan base for the WNBA," Cameron said. "We'll have the best women athletes in the world,

and we'll also mix that with the entertainment factor like the NBA is able to do in Oklahoma City."

WNBA president Donna Orender was in Tulsa on Wednesday, meeting with the investors and potential season-ticket holders. Orender did not attend the press conference but was made available to reporters afterward. Orender said she was impressed by how

much groundwork the investors have completed.

Orender said the success of women's college basketball in Oklahoma works in Tulsa's favor.

"Top-flight programs really help educate the populace," Orender said. "It's a big positive. OU and OSU garnering national attention, all their television exposure — it's a very good thing."

Q&A

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE WNBA IN TULSA

WNBA president Donna Orender

Donna Orender was in Tulsa on Wednesday meeting with city leaders and potential investors to discuss bringing a WNBA franchise to town. The WNBA president isn't new to Tulsa. She worked for the PGA for 17 years before taking her current position, and has visited the city in the past.

Orender said her visit was a sign of confidence to Tulsa's pursuit for a team in the women's professional basketball league.

What are your impressions of Tulsa, not only as a WNBA president?

I've been here in the past for sporting events. I've been around.

I've eaten at some good restaurants, and the people are terrific.

There's a strong golf tradition here, and a lot of my friends and colleagues have been here, so obviously I have a favorable impression.

Is it safe to say you wouldn't be here if you didn't have confidence in this community?

If we didn't believe that this was truly an option and a city that's going to step up and be successful, we wouldn't be here.

We believe in Bill and David and what they're trying to do. Mayor Kathy Taylor and the community leaders have been terrific. We're saying show us, because we want to see everyone step up and say yes. All the steps that have been taken have been positive ones.

Tulsa would be the smallest community in this league. Can they make that disadvantage an advantage?

When you look at the business model and the scale of the WNBA, a city like Tulsa can be enormously successful. There's quality management and the sport and what this property is speaks to the community. When you're in a city that talks about revitalizing and generating excitement about their downtown and wanting major league entertainment ... this is major league entertainment. They want to demonstrate they're a leader in this country in terms of their values. Having a major league women's sports team is the way to do that. What a great way to provide role models for your youth. There's nothing better. In terms of numbers, the numbers are here.

BY ERIC BAILEY, TULSA WORLD

An investment group hopes to bring a WNBA franchise to Tulsa for the 2010 season. The group's leaders say they need to meet several criteria by Sept. 1 to land a franchise. Here's a look at some questions and answers about the process:

Why Tulsa?

Oklahoma City businessmen Bill Cameron and David Box are spearheading the effort to bring a team. They called the BOK Center a major league venue that should have a major league sport. They also consider Tulsa an untapped market for women's basketball.

Tulsa is smaller than the other 13 cities in the league and will have to average about 5,000 fans per home game to break even.

Why are they interested in the WNBA in Tulsa?

Cameron has a passion for women's basketball, especially with his daughter's involvement in the sport. Box, who grew up in Tahlequah, is excited about the opportunity to land a team in Tulsa. Both have spent the past several months researching and analyzing the feasibility of a team in Tulsa. They liked what they saw.

Would this team be affiliated with the NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder?

No. Cameron is part of the Thunder's ownership group and says he is friends with Thunder owner Clay Bennett. But Bennett isn't part of the ownership group trying to land a WNBA team. The Thunder and a Tulsa WNBA team wouldn't be affiliated.

Was it a good sign that WNBA president Donna Orender was in Tulsa on Wednesday?

Yes, but don't read too much into it. Orender said she wants Tulsa's bid to come through, but she won't award a franchise until everything is in place. "If we didn't believe that



Investor Bill Cameron, left, announces his group's effort to bring a WNBA team to Tulsa. Also pictured is Mike Neal of the Tulsa Metro Chamber, second from left, Tulsa Mayor Kathy Taylor and investor David Box.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN HOLMAN, TULSA WORLD

this was truly an option and a city that's going to step up and be successful, we wouldn't be here," Orender said.

Orender listed five factors for landing a team — strong ownership, management, ticket sales, corporate sponsorships and an arena deal.

When does a deal need to be done?

The ownership group has a Sept. 1 deadline, although they might be given a few extra days if a deal is close. Orender said the WNBA starts its scheduling in early September, so a decision will have to be made by then.

Additional investors are needed for this to work. Can they be found in less than 40 days?

Box said they haven't had much trouble finding investors, a group they prefer to be Tulsa-based. It's more about finding quality people, he said. Box added that time is spent with each potential investor to make sure they are the right fit. "We're not just looking for people to invest, but high-quality people that we want

to be partners for a long time."

How much will it cost to bring a team to Tulsa, and how much has the investment group raised?

They didn't provide details on either figure. According to multiple sources, a franchise could cost in the range of \$6 million to \$10 million.

How much would tickets cost in Tulsa?

The investment group didn't reveal specific prices. Orender said the average ticket costs about \$18 in the league, and there is a "huge array" of \$10 tickets available.

Will Tulsa get a team?

A good relationship seems to be building between the WNBA and the Tulsa group (marked by Orender's visit). Cameron said the group is two-thirds finished with recruiting investors, but that final one-third may be hard to find. In the end, it may come down to not only money, but building a fan base, and ticket sales, in the next six weeks.

BY ERIC BAILEY, TULSA WORLD