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SNAPPERS

New Beloit stadium, owner for Snappers announced

By Neil Johnson Adams Publishing Group 12 hrs ago

BELOIT — After years of uncertainty over whether Beloit will continue to have a minor league baseball team, a plan has come forward for a long-awaited and long-rumored new stadium.

The Snappers will stay put in Beloit under new ownership in a new, 5,000-seat stadium that would break ground off next year off Shirland Avenue, near the Wisconsin-Illinois state line, according to an announcement late Thursday afternoon.

Under the deal announced Thursday, Janesville native and Pensacola, Florida resident Quint Studer would be the new owner of the Snappers.

Studer would lease the stadium under a guaranteed, 20-year deal that's part of a joint agreement between the Snappers, Studer Entertainment and Retail, and the newly-formed Riverbend Stadium Authority, according to a news release.

Studer, a local philanthropist and former healthcare consultant, would operate the Snappers franchise.

It's not clear what it would cost to bankroll a new stadium, but the Riverbend Stadium Authority's plan, according to the release, is being backed largely through financing by Beloit billionaire and business mogul Diane Hendricks, according to the news release.

The stadium, a 5,000-capacity facility that would continue to host the Snappers as a Class A Minor League Baseball affiliate of the Oakland Athletics, could break ground in spring 2020 and be ready for play by April 2021, sources familiar with the project told The Gazette.

Studer pumped several million dollars into renovating retail storefronts on North Main Street in downtown Janesville in 2016. He co-owns and operates the Blue Wahoos, a Minor League Baseball team that plays at a stadium Studer built in Pensacola.

The Riverbend Stadium Authority would design the stadium on a 7-acre site between the Rock River, the Beloit Transit facility and Beloit City Hall.

On Thursday, the stadium authority hired Indiana design firm Jones Petrie Rafinski to draw up initial designs for the new stadium, which would replace Pohlman Field, an aging stadium that local officials have said Minor League Baseball has long considered inadequate.

Earlier this year, Midwest League president Dick Nussbaum told the Beloit Daily News that progress had been made on talks for a new Beloit stadium, but that there was a continued sense of urgency around the league that the undersized, 38-year-old Pohlman Field is no longer an acceptable facility for professional baseball.

The Snappers franchise has an agreement through the Professional Baseball Agreement to continue to play at Pohlman through the 2020 season, but the clock has been ticking on a plan for a new stadium.

Snappers officials had said earlier this year they'd neared the finish line on financing to build a downtown stadium. Pohlman, which holds 3,500 spectators but hasn't reached capacity in a number of years, is located near Interstate 90/30.

In an interview on Thursday night, Studer said called the deal for a new stadium a "make or break time" for Beloit and the (Snappers) franchise" if the city wanted to keep its minor league ball club.

"It's so ironic. Once you lose a team because a city won't build a stadium, then they lose a team and they end up scrambling to try to build a stadium. But then there's no team available."

Studer has been in talks for about three years after the head of Minor League Baseball called to gauge Studer's interest in the Snappers. Studer said conversations really began to heat up between him, Hendricks and the Snappers last year.

Studer said Hendricks's interest in building a stadium in downtown Beloit was what sealed his interest in taking on a second minor league franchise. He called Hendricks "iconic" in her work over the last decade bankrolling revitalization in Beloit's downtown.

"I really have just great admiration for Diane Hendricks. I think that when Diane Hendricks does something, she does it right. And if you want to partner with somebody or lease from somebody, you want a landlord that does things right," Studer said.

No current schematic drawings available for the stadium, but the Riverbend Stadium Authority and backers for the project plan to make more details public at a Beloit City Council meeting Monday night. Studer said a stadium like the one being planned can cost upward of “\$30 to \$35 million” to build.

Minor League Baseball, Major League Baseball and the Midwest League all must sign off on the stadium plan to ensure it meets standards for professional baseball, and the city council must approve a transfer of lease from Pohlman Field to the new stadium.

Studer said if a new stadium isn't completed by spring 2021, he believes the Snappers could continue playing at Pohlman until it could move into the new park.

The Riverbend Stadium Authority said in a statement that it “plans to lead a successful capital campaign to engage local support as a key component for a successful project,” which the group refers to as a “community ballpark” that would host other events in the offseason.

Studer believes that the 7-acre spot on the south end of the downtown is a prime location. He said he likes the idea of a stadium being along the Rock River and within walking distance from downtown.

He said the Pensacola baseball stadium he operates holds about 5,000 people, but only has about 300 parking spots for spectators. He said he believes that a downtown location will allow people to park downtown, use restaurants, shop and then walk to the game.

He imagines an atmosphere before games like in Wrigleyville in Chicago, on a smaller scale.

Lori Luther, Beloit's city manager, said after a decade of work trying to galvanize a new Snappers stadium, she and the city are pleased with the new plan announced Thursday. She said that a downtown stadium would be a “community amenity that could lead to additional economic development and job growth...in our downtown and beyond.”

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