

January 30, 2002

The Enterprise

Brockton baseball stadium project in a squeeze play

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BROCKTON The clock is ticking on the \$17 million stadium and conference center project: \$6 million in work has been done, but only a fraction of it has been reimbursed.

Now, architects are withholding plans in anticipation of payment, while the city has yet to sign a lease agreement with the team.

"We're fine, we're absolutely fine," Mayor John T. Yunits Jr. said Tuesday. But "we're at the point, honestly, where the architects aren't going to release the drawings without getting paid."

The stadium has a scheduled opening date of May 31, the first day its Northern League team is scheduled for a home game.

Yunits said a lease agreement between the team and Brockton 21st Century Corp., the project's manager, will be signed Thursday at 2 p.m. in his office.

If the architects do not get paid, construction will not continue as the Building Department cannot issue a permit without certified plans.

The state, which has committed \$6 million to the project, has not cut a check. A \$2 million gift from developer Alfred Campanelli does not come until the project is halfway complete in March if all goes well and the city, which plans to float \$8 million in taxable bonds, will not sell those bonds until April.

All is not doomed, however.

Project backers say the facility, now under construction on five acres behind Brockton High School, is viable.

"It's progressing," said David Curtis, chairman of the 21st Century Corp.

While the stadium may not be 100 percent complete on opening day, it will be playable, backers say.

Chief Financial Officer John Condon said that with a signed contract, he can release \$1.5 million in city reserves immediately to pay the contractors, then reimburse that money once the bonds are floated.

"I don't think the project is going to shut down," Condon said.

Ward 7 City Councilor Charles Logan, who is helping to supervise construction, said the custom steel beams will be delivered within the next five days. The steel, which costs nearly \$1 million, must be paid for within 30 days of delivery, and Logan said he believes the contractor, Payton Construction, put down a deposit to secure the material, where the city could not.

The field itself has been laid and the foundations largely completed.

But "to actually keep going with the steel, we need more detailed drawings," Logan said. "We've already strained all of the contractors' and design people's resources to the limit."

Dominick Ianno, a spokesman for the state Department of Administration and Finance, said his agency is committed to funding its share of the project.

"The project has not hit a snag from our end," he said. But "there's no time frame (on payment). It's moving forward."

Yunits said that once the contracts are signed, "we're going to start the payments (to contractors) next week."

The lease agreement was agreed to in principle with Brockton Rox owner Van Schley and his investors in December. It has since been held up by legal wrangling, from punctuation to minor details, like who sweeps the parking lot.

"They are not major issues that break a deal, but most of the issues relate to the actual language of the deal," said Arthur Markos, president of the 21st Century Corp.

Team President Tom Whaley, who is in charge of negotiations, could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Under the lease, the team will pay a percentage of the 4,750-seat stadium's revenue, up to 12 percent if it breaks \$4 million in a year, Condon said. The 12,000-square-foot conference center will be leased on a similar sliding scale.

The project does face at least one hurdle. The Department of Administration and Finance has yet to rule on whether the contractor must certify payroll under the prevailing wage law, and if it does, that could cost \$500,000, which would transfer to scale-backs in design, Yunits said.

The project is being built without a signed agreement with the Brockton and Vicinity Building Trades union, which had pressed to have a majority of the construction jobs set aside for union members.

The team's 20-year lease will pay the city's bond commitment and generate as much as \$400,000 in new hotel-motel and meals taxes in the city.

Backers say that while the project has been fast-tracked, it has worked because it is considered so exciting and because the firms working on it, from the land surveyor to the contractor, are committed to it and willing to wait for their pay.

"This whole stadium project was built around the idea of not changing the tax rate in the city of Brockton, only enhancing the image and value of the city, and it continues on that course. We're not going to the residents and taxpayers asking them for any money to fund this project," Logan said. "This is a cooperative effort."

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