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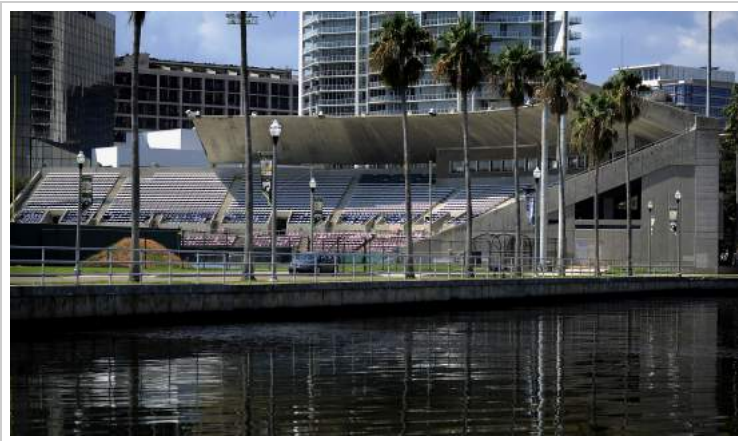
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# St. Pete OKs soccer deal for Al Lang Stadium



Al Lang Stadium, a link to baseball history as one of the birthplaces of spring training, will be a soccer venue for the next four years. CHRIS URSO/STAFF



BY CHRISTOPHER O'DONNELL

Tribune staff

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ST. PETERSBURG — For the next four years, soccer and not baseball will be the game played at Al Lang Stadium, likely heralding the end of the site's long association with professional baseball.

The City Council on Thursday approved a four-year deal to let developer and Tampa Bay Rowdies owner Bill Edwards run the stadium through his Big 3 Entertainment company. Under the deal,



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which takes effect today, Edwards will spend \$1.5 million of his own money improving the stadium in the next two years. Big 3 also runs the Mahaffey Theater on behalf of the city.

The agreement ends the legal dust up between the Rowdies and the St. Petersburg Baseball Commission, the non-profit group that has run the stadium since 2010. The Rowdies sued the commission earlier this year claiming that poor conditions at the stadium violated the commission's contract to provide a professional-quality facility for Rowdies' games.

Baseball has been played at Al Lang since 1977 and on the same site at Al Lang Field since 1947. The site was a springtime home for Major League Baseball teams including the New York Yankees, the Boston Braves and the St. Louis Cardinals, a place touched by legends like Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio and Stan Musial.

But the aging stadium has not been home field for any MLB baseball since the Tampa Bay Rays moved their spring training operation to Port Charlotte in 2009. Now, when the Rowdies soccer season ends in a few weeks, the field will no longer be converted back to a baseball diamond.

"It's sad to see that go," said Councilman Jim Kennedy, a Tampa Bay Rays season-ticket holder who attended spring games at Al Lang. "The reality of it is Al Lang will not be able to be what it once was because Major League Baseball requires a much larger footprint than Al Lang stadium provides."

An amendment will be added to the city's contract with Big 3 to ensure Al Lang remains part of the venue's name even if the stadium's naming rights are sold. The city would get 80 percent of any naming rights deal up to \$100,000. Above that, its share drops to 20 percent.

"All the pleasure and enjoyment we had watching baseball games there is a thing of the past," said Council Chairman Bill Dudley. "But Al Lang should always be included in the name of that facility."

Edwards said one of the first stadium improvements will be to restore a plaque honoring Babe Ruth. He also plans an exhibit showing the history of the Rowdies franchise, which dates to 1970.

"We will have baseball remembered, we will have soccer remembered," he said.

The deal will mean the Rowdies now earn money from ticket and concession sales, revenue that previously went to the baseball commission as landlord. That will allow the team to attract better players and compete for championships, Edwards said.

"I've never seen a professional sports franchise that didn't control their own facility," he said.

Edwards's success in wresting control of the stadium from the commission is likely to increase speculation that he will push the city to build a soccer stadium on the site and perhaps push for the Rowdies to leave the second tier North American League for Major League Soccer.

The St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce and Rowdies fans have called for the city to embrace soccer and eventually to replace Al Lang with a soccer or generic sports stadium.

"While this may be the death of baseball at Al Lang, soccer is alive and kicking," said Councilwoman Darden Rice, a Rowdies season ticket holder. "We will have the Rowdies if we lose the Rays."

But Mayor Rick Kriseman has been reluctant to commit the city to soccer and



Bill Edwards

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resisted requests from Edwards for a longer-term contract to run Al Lang. The long-term future of the site will be a key part of the ongoing Downtown Waterfront Master Plan study being conducted by AECOM.

Council Vice Chairman Steve Kornell was the lone vote against the deal saying it does not provide enough protection to the city's Saturday morning market, which operates in the Al Lang parking lot. The contract with Big 3 ensures that the market and the Grand Prix will continue, city officials said.

As part of the deal, Edwards also ended his interest in running the Walter Fuller Complex, a park with five baseball fields in the west of the city that the baseball commission rents to visiting teams. The commission's contract for that facility was extended through 2017 and the park will be used for international baseball games originally scheduled for Al Lang.

The city will pay \$100,000 per year for operating costs at Walter Fuller and the same amount for maintenance and upgrades.

Council members stressed that the deal with Edwards is only four years and the city is not giving the land to him as some residents feared. Asked about that concern, Edwards said the city will benefit from his investment.

"Citizens have a million and a half reasons why they should be happy I got Al Lang," he said.

In other action, council members approved the purchase of new trucks and recycling containers for the city's planned curbside recycling program. Officials said the program could begin in July and will cost \$2.95. The program is not mandatory, but every household will be charged.

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**Γιϋργος Τσπαλίδης** · Top Commenter

This is a win, win situation. The city wins and the Rowdies win. St.Petersburg and Al Lang stadium will soon become a meca for football(soccer) in the US and the Rowdies will continue as one of the most storied franchises. The next four years are going to be the greatest football(soccer) years Tampa Bay has had in its history. COYR!

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