

Nationwide's pitch for ballpark can't be beat

Arena developer awarded project, will do work for free

By Robert Vitale
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The company that built Nationwide Arena and came up with the idea for an entertainment district to surround it now will turn its attention to one of the neighborhood's final pieces.

Franklin County commissioners chose Nationwide Realty Investors yesterday to oversee development of Huntington Park, the new Arena District baseball stadium they plan to build for the county-owned Columbus Clippers.

One of its major selling points: The "hometown team," as Commissioner Paula Brooks called the locally based arm of Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co., has offered to do the job free.

Nationwide Realty President Brian Ellis said the company will waive its fees as a "portion of our contribution to the project." For a project the size

of the \$55 million stadium, owner's representatives usually would charge up to \$1.25 million.

Two other companies chosen to present their plans last week estimated their charges at \$700,000 to \$900,000, county officials said.

"We see this project very much as a civic project," Ellis said. "We want to see a great facility. We want to see that project done on time and on budget."

On time might prove to be a challenge.

Commissioners have said they want the stadium ready for baseball games by mid-season 2008. Commissioner Mary Jo Kilroy said yesterday, however, that county officials need to be realistic about the timetable. If it comes down to a choice between time and cost, she said, keeping the stadium within budget should win out.

The county has bought land for the ballpark at Nationwide Boulevard and Neil Avenue, but the former gas-station site needs more cleanup than officials expect-

ed. Commissioners have vowed since announcing the project nearly a year ago that local taxpayers won't pick up the tab.

"More than opening in '08, I want to see a good stadium, a quality stadium, a good fan experience and the project staying on budget," Kilroy said.

Although Nationwide has offered to oversee the project free, county officials still must negotiate an agreement. Ellis said the company will devote 6,800 staff hours, from selecting an architect to the final phases of construction.

County Administrator Don L. Brown said he'll seek written assurances from Nationwide that it will put the county's interests first on stadium issues, even as it looks out for its own investments in the Arena District.

He said the county also will seek a formal agreement on Arena District parking rates for Huntington Park patrons.

In addition to their promise to pay for the stadium without county money, commissioners have pledged to keep

ticket prices and parking rates comparable to those at Cooper Stadium, the Clippers' current home in Franklinton.

In choosing Nationwide to oversee the stadium's design and construction, commissioners rejected bids by two other companies that have had a hand in major-league ballparks built across the country.

Chicago-based International Facilities Group was the owner's representative for the Cincinnati Reds during construction of the city's Great American Ball Park. The company also has been involved in baseball-stadium projects in Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, Miami and the District of Columbia.

The head of Willoughby-based CT Consultants was project manager during construction of the Cleveland Indians' Jacobs Field.

Nationwide won out, Kilroy said, because "They want to see a quality project in their backyard."