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City awarded an NHL Team

Expansion franchise starts play in 2000

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Columbus will be granted a National Hockey League expansion team that will begin play in 2000, two television networks reported last night.

CNN-SI and The Sports Network, based in Canada, reported that the league also will grant expansion franchises to Nashville, Atlanta and St. Paul, Minn.

Citing unnamed sources, the networks said the league's executive committee will recommend that Nashville join the league in 1998, Atlanta in 1999 and St. Paul and Columbus in 2000. The league has also named Houston and Oklahoma City as finalists in the expansion derby.

The committee's recommendation must be ratified by the

NHL Board of Governors, which will meet June 25 in New York.

Arthur Pincus, league spokesman, declined to comment on the reports.

A source told The Dispatch last night that league officials are expected to make a formal announcement regarding the recommendations today and press conferences likely will be held in Columbus and other expansion cities.

The four new teams would bring the league's membership to 30. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman has refused to discuss in which divisions the teams would play or how the teams would be stocked with players.

The Columbus team will be owned by a group headed by John H. McConnell, founder of Worthington Industries. It remained unclear yesterday whether Lamar Hunt, who was an integral part of the city's original investment group, was still on board.

Each expansion group will be required to pay an estimated \$80 million league entry fee.

Columbus' ownership group became unsettled after the defeat on May 6 of Issue 1, a 0.5 percent, three-year sales tax issue that would have funded a Downtown stadium/arena complex.

Instead, the hockey team will play in a \$125 million Downtown arena to be privately owned by Nationwide Mutual Insurances Cos. (90 percent) and The Dispatch Printing Company (10 percent). The 20,000-seat arena will be built on Nationwide Boulevard just west of Front Street. It is expect to be ready for the 2000-2001 hockey season.

Columbus, the largest city in the United States without a major league sports team, would fill an NHL void in Ohio.

Nashville's hockey team will be Tennessee's first major league team, arriving one year before the National Football League's

Oilers arrive from Houston. Granting a team to St. Paul returns the NHL to the Twin Cities, which lost the North Stars to Dallas in 1993. Atlanta also previously had a team in hockey's premier league, but lost the Flames to Calgary in 1980.

Atlanta's bid was submitted by Ted Turner, whose media empire is coveted by the NHL.

The Columbus investors were among 11 groups from nine cities that submitted expansion applications to the league in October. The groups made formal presentations to league officials in New York in January. The league announced six finalists in February. An expansion committee visited Columbus in April.

Columbus also was courted by Hartford Whalers owner Peter Karmanos, who considered moving his team to central Ohio before settling on Raleigh, N.C., in early May.