

## Houston awarded NFL expansion franchise

ATLANTA (AP) — Houston re-announced the NFL yesterday, paying a \$700 million for an expansion franchise and beating out Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest market.

The vote, announced by commissioner Paul Tagliabue, was 29-0 in favor of Houston. Twenty-four votes were needed for approval.

The decision represents a blow to Los Angeles, which could not win on several proposals for a stadium site. The city lost the Raiders franchise to Oakland and the Rams to St. Louis after the 1994 season.

The vote awarding Houston businessman Bob McNair the team was the first in 15 years.

McNair said the \$700 million fee is the highest for a sports team in the United States. With a \$310 million stadium included, the Houston deal would be worth more than \$1 billion — a first for the NFL.

"It's a great day for Houston, we hope a great day for football," McNair said. "Our facility will be second to none."

The vote returns an NFL team to Houston, which lost the Oilers to Tennessee after the 1996 season and is the nation's No. 11 TV market.

The name of the Houston team is not set, but Tagliabue said it would not be "Oilers." When Cleveland lost its franchise to Baltimore after the 1995 season, the NFL brought back a team to Cleveland, along with its traditional nickname, colors and records.

Upon hearing the news today, football enthusiasts in Houston were ecstatic.

Larry Dluhy, owner of Sports Collectibles of Houston, was a long-

time Oilers fan, but said he welcomed the return of an NFL team.

"We're on cloud nine," Dluhy said. "We just can't believe it, it's so exciting. I've lived here all my life and the last two years with the Oilers gone, there's been a huge vacancy. It's like an empty closet and now we've filled it back up."

At the SRO Sports Bar & Cafe near downtown Houston, the lunch crowd had not yet arrived, but manager Kathryn Scharringhausen was already celebrating.

"It's awesome," Scharringhausen said. "I'm very happy and I know it's going to be great for our business." "I think everyone just loves a Houston home team."

Owners also voted to adjust the league alignment to eight divisions of four teams each. Right now, there are six divisions — one with six teams and the rest with five.

Houston will be placed in the AFC, where the old Oilers played. That would mean one AFC team would have to switch to the NFC. Arizona and St. Louis abstained be-

cause of questions over the proposed alignment.

McNair said a retractable-roof stadium will be completed in time for Houston to play its first season in 2002. Public funds of \$195 million will go into the project.

**"It's a great day for Houston; we hope a great day for football."**

— Bob McNair  
Houston expansion franchise

As part of the deal, Houston will be the site of a Super Bowl "as soon as practical after completion of the stadium," Tagliabue said.

"We've made an outstanding business proposal, and these are good business people who know a good proposal," McNair said.

"From what I know about the other proposals, I don't think they compare to ours. I think the main issue is that Houston's ready to go."

The league's expansion committee met with McNair on Tuesday evening and also heard Michael Ovitiz make another pitch for giving Los Angeles the 32nd team.

McNair's \$700 million franchise bid is some \$50 million higher than the new franchise was expected to be worth. Ovitiz, who most recently proposed building a stadium at Hollywood Park in Inglewood, Calif., and another group seeking a team for the Los Angeles Coliseum apparently did not make an offer anywhere close to the one Houston put on the table.

Ovitiz and his backers hold an option on a parcel of land at Hollywood Park. But he obtained the option just last week, so any plan for that site would have to be in the very early stages.

Ed Roski, one of the Coliseum backers, also was in Atlanta. He would not disclose the amount of

the offer made by his group, which includes billionaire Eli Broad. Roski did say that he believed any plan to build a stadium at Hollywood Park faced a number of challenges, including lacking easy access to freeways, that the Coliseum proposal did not face.

Los Angeles City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas said in Los Angeles that the Coliseum group never received a clear idea of what the NFL wanted in LA.

The league owners voted 29-2 last March to give Los Angeles a team conditional on the NFL's receiving a suitable stadium and financing proposal by Sept. 15.

The league shortly afterward narrowed the choice down to the Coliseum, eliminating a bid by Ovitiz, who proposed building a stadium in suburban Carson. But the negotiations with the Coliseum stalled last summer after the NFL's request — and did not receive — the promise of \$150 million in public funds to go toward the Coliseum project.

## Rangers use day off to try and correct postseason problems

NEW YORK (AP) — Just what the Texas Rangers needed: a day off in the big city. They could watch television and dwell on their seven-game postseason slide.

They could read the newspapers and dwell on their 22-inning playoff scoreless game.

They could listen to the radio and the constant talk of a Subway Series between the Yankees and Mets.

"Nobody expects us to win," Game 2 pitcher Rick Helling said yesterday. "To me, the pressure is on the Yankees. They won the first game."

Won is an understatement. Orlando Hernandez held the Rangers to two hits in the first inning and Bernie Williams had six hits in New York's series-opening 8-0 win Tuesday night.

Helling (1-3-11), who gave up a major

league-high 41 homers, pitches against Andy Pettitte (14-11) on Thursday night before the series moves to Arlington.

*"To me, all the pressure is on the Yankees. They won the first game."*

— RICK HELLING  
RANGERS PITCHER



"Obviously, if you're down one, it's a lot more important game," Pettitte said. "But it's still important. If we can get the second game here and go there to Texas up two, we feel confident."

Sound familiar?

After the Yankees beat Texas in last year's postseason opener, Pettitte faced Helling in Game 2 and led New York to a 3-1 win, allowing one run and three hits in seven innings with eight strikeouts.

Helling gave up three runs and eight hits in six innings.

"It was just like it has been so far in all these games against the Yankees," Helling said. "We got outpitched a little bit, didn't score enough runs to win."

Helling, who traveled from the team hotel to the Bronx by limo, was the only Rangers' player in sight at Yankee Stadium on Wednesday, with manager Johnny Oates giving his team a day off. About half the Yankees showed for an optional workout.

The clubhouse mood was businesslike.

The Yankees need 10 more wins to achieve their goal of a third World Series title in four seasons, and they are hoping to find the consistency that led them to a record 125 wins a year ago.

New York is hoping Pettitte will pitch with confidence, as he did in a record 21-3 victory at Arlington on Aug. 23.

"They're a scary team to play against because you know they're going to break loose," New York's Paul O'Neill said. "They're going to score runs when it's all said and done."

Texas hopes so. The Rangers have just one run in their last 42 playoff innings — all against the Yankees.

"We're a very good offensive ball club," said Rangers general manager Doug Melvin, whose team led the American League in batting for the second straight

year. "We'll break out of it somewhere along the line here. Just hope that it's sooner than later."

Texas may have its best chance against Pettitte, a Texan from Deer Park. Juan Gonzalez is 10-for-22 (.455) against the left-hander, Rusty Greer is 9-for-25 (.360), Todd Zeile 5-for-14 (.357) and Rafael Palmeiro 13-for-44 (.295) with four homers and nine RBIs.

Pettitte put pressure on himself anywhere he played during the first four months of this season. He was 7-8 at the July 31 trade deadline, looking lost during some starts.

Manager Joe Torre and several of owner George Steinbrenner's baseball people argued that Pettitte should not be dealt. And once the deadline passed, Pettitte appeared to relax, winning three straight starts and five of six.



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