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# Stingers to fly away from Spartanburg to Forest City after this summer season

By **JASON SPENCER, Staff Writer**

Fifty-six more games - and the Spartanburg Stingers will be no more.

The Stingers, part of the Coastal Plain League, next year will find a permanent home in Forest City, N.C., complete with a new name, a new stadium and new faces filling the stands.

It's a loss to Spartanburg's 80-year-old Duncan Park Stadium, which has seen all levels of baseball grace its diamond over time.

The Stingers played there for four years. But with the stadium now closed, the team will play the 2007 season at Wofford College, including 28 home games and 28 away. The Stingers, city leaders and the college were able to broker a one-year lease to make that happen.

But moving from Duncan Park to Wofford put the team in "limbo," manager James Wolfe said, and caused the Stingers to look for something more long term.

"We needed some insurance and some security in case things didn't work out. Forest City came up strong," Wolfe said. "That, combined with the enthusiasm that's going on up there, it's one of the things that we couldn't turn down."

Forest City is planning up to \$2 million in renovations to its American Legion field - which, from now on, will be known as the McNair Municipal Stadium - and has promised a presale of at least 200 season tickets. The Stingers have a 10-year lease.

Bob McNair, owner of the NFL team the Houston Texans, personally put up \$850,000 toward the project.

McNair grew up in Forest City, and graduated from the University of South Carolina. His wife still has family in the Spartanburg area.

The Stingers' roster consists of college students, most of whom want to get extra practice or extra exposure during the summer.

Wolfe anticipates a healthy number of players from Spartanburg colleges will continue to play for the team after the move, particularly from Spartanburg Methodist, the University of South Carolina Upstate

and Wofford. The team is responsible for finding families in the community to house the players if they're not local.

"I wish them well," Spartanburg Mayor Bill Barnet said. "I was delighted they were in Spartanburg, and I wish the circumstances of Duncan Park had been different. Maybe that would have changed their thought process."

An estimated \$4.7 million would be needed to make the Duncan Park Stadium a real attraction, and the park only collected a few thousand dollars each year from the Stingers.

That's not deterring the Friends of Duncan Park, a community group bent on keeping this piece of the city's - and of baseball's - history intact.

"We wish the Stingers the best, but we're moving along," said Lenny Mathis, president of the Friends of Duncan Park.

"We've actually been in conversations with other baseball organizations - I can't say who - but we're hoping to hear back positive things."

The year 2009 has been floated as a potential target date for saving the park, Mathis said. The group is working with the city, but ultimately negotiations and any bottom-line decisions - like contract-signing or giving the green light for renovations - lie with the local government.

Had the city been more aggressive with its plan, the Stingers might have decided to stick around.

"They still probably will save the park. But they're looking at a three- to four-year time frame for that to happen," Wolfe said. "With economics and things like that, I don't think the Stingers would have been able to survive to see that happen."

Saving the park puts the city in a tough situation, in terms of weighing the money that would be needed to do so against the potential long-term benefits and other financial obligations.

"We're kicking all the tires. To justify the kind of money that we're going to have to spend would take more than the Stingers," Barnet said.

Forest City doesn't have a big college scene like Spartanburg, but it has many nearby high schools with successful baseball programs - East Rutherford and Shelby, for instance - and has many students go off to school to play baseball who come home for the summer, Wolfe said.

The Stingers' first game of this season is at home. It will be at about 7 p.m. on May 30.

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