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Senators bid impresses MLS officials

By Rob Brodie

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If you build it, they will come.

That's the message Major League Soccer commissioner Don Garber delivered emphatically during discussions with Senators Sports & Entertainment – which hopes to land an expansion franchise – and the three levels of government that are an integral part of the group's bid plan.

Garber and league president Mark Abbott spent the past two days in Ottawa, meeting with Senators Sports & Entertainment owner Eugene Melnyk and COO Cyril Leeder about their proposal to be awarded one of two MLS expansion teams for the 2011 season. Vancouver, Miami, St. Louis and Portland, Ore., are also in the hunt.

SSE's plan includes a \$110-million soccer-specific stadium, to be built adjacent to Scotiabank Place. Garber made it clear at a news conference Tuesday that the stadium holds the key to Ottawa's bid hopes.

"If Ottawa is awarded an expansion team, our league needs to know there will be a stadium for that team to play in," he said. "It's been a key part of our discussions. We can't come here unless we have a stadium ... that's the hurdle that needs to be overcome to be able to approve an expansion team here."

Meetings were also held with City of Ottawa and federal and provincial government representatives about the SSE stadium proposal. Both Melnyk and Garber termed those discussions as positive.

"We've had very, very productive discussions," said Melnyk. "Ultimately, I think we will succeed. It's just a question of when. But we're trying, we're trying our darndest."

The SSE bid also includes a \$40-million MLS expansion fee. Melnyk said government support is vital to make it all happen. The stadium is to be built on what is currently city-owned land in Kanata.

"We need land for this, for starters, but we do need financial support to be able to complete this (project)," said Melnyk. "I'm prepared to make a substantial equity investment into the franchise and pay the franchise fee. But we do need all three levels of government to support this."

Complicating matters is a competing proposal to renovate Lansdowne Park and obtain a Canadian Football League franchise. Garber said it's his understanding that government funding will go toward one project or the other, but not both.

"I do believe they do have a choice that they need to make," he said. "It's pretty clear in the discussions we've had with all three (levels) of government."

In a statement, Ottawa Mayor Larry O'Brien expressed enthusiasm for the SSE bid.

“The fact that Senators Sports Entertainment, Eugene Melnyk and MLS are looking at Ottawa as a potential venue for professional soccer is a huge positive for our city,” he said. “We now have two world-class proposals that see the private sector and professional sports wanting to help grow and improve the nation’s capital.”

Melnyk, for his part, is steadfast in his belief that soccer is a most worthy long-term investment for the community.

“This is going to happen,” he said. “It’s just a question and a matter of time. I think the support we have shown here, with 90,000-plus people playing soccer in the Ottawa-

Gatineau area, overwhelms some of the other places where soccer is a huge success.

“I think it’s going to be a very, very successful project, I think it’s going to be here for a long, long time, for decades and decades. You’re going to see generations of people going through that stadium and I’m going to be very proud to be a part of that.”

The stadium issue aside, Garber strongly believes Ottawa would be an ideal addition to the MLS family.

“You have that (feeling) that this is a soccer town,” he said. “It’s the country’s capital. It’s a place we believe has the kind of heritage for sport and the success for sport that will drive, in our view, the success of a professional soccer team. That’s what you need to make it successful.

“I do believe that, in time, Ottawa will have an MLS franchise.”

A final decision on the MLS bids is expected by the end of March.