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Swimming hall of fame could move next to 49ers' new Santa Clara stadium

By Mike Rosenberg

SANTA CLARA -- Fresh off luring the San Francisco 49ers and on the verge of scoring hosting rights for the 50th Super Bowl, Santa Clara is setting its sights on a new sports target: The International Swimming Hall of Fame.

A team of Silicon Valley financial and sports luminaries endorsed by city leaders has raised \$6 million in an attempt to move swimming's hall of fame next to the Hilton Santa Clara, a few backstrokes from the new NFL stadium.

Since 1965, the hall of fame has been in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., but its lease expires in 2015 and the private nonprofit that operates the swimming shrine and museum is fed up with terms imposed by local officials in Florida. So hall of fame officials have signed a nonbinding deal agreeing in principle to move to Santa Clara should the Silicon Valley raise \$10 million for construction and a \$2 million endowment.



Gold medalists in 400-meter relay at the 1964 Olympics: from left, Lillian Watson of Portola Valley, Donna de Varona of Santa Clara, and Sharon Stouder of Glendora, California. The fourth member was Kathy Ellis of Indianapolis. (AP Photo)

"There are a lot of reasons why Santa Clara makes terrific sense," said Bruce Wigo, the hall of fame's CEO, noting the prime location and the proud history of swimming in Santa Clara, whose swim club has produced more hall of famers -- 18 -- than any other club in the nation. "This will be a great spot."

Still, there remain issues over the land rights required for the new museum and raising the last \$6 million dollars needed to advance the agreement from a handshake to a reality. Wigo noted that while "Santa Clara has put a premium on us," there are several other cities and states around the world that are interested and could swoop in with a better offer.

The latest cross-country battle comes just days before NFL owners on Tuesday vote between Santa Clara and South Florida to host the 2016 Super Bowl. South Florida

officials, who were unable to get the Legislature to put a measure on the ballot to renovate their aging Sun Life Stadium to match the brand-new Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, are now pushing to keep the swimming hall of fame but have proposed what Wigo calls an "unattractive" offer.

Patrick Yam, a Menlo Park-based venture capitalist and mentor to Wigo's two sons -- who were All-American water polo players at Stanford -- is joining 49ers president and former Facebook CFO Gideon Yu to co-chair a new committee aiming to bring the hall of fame to Santa Clara. The group also includes former Oakland Athletics co-owner Steve Schott, local swimmers and city leaders, and has secured \$6 million in commitments so far, led by a \$1 million donation from Lawrence Lui, president of Stanford Hotels, which owns the Hilton Santa Clara.

"It will be very technology-engaged," said Yam, who says he's meeting with Silicon Valley tech CEOs seeking help. "They all want to be involved."

The hall of fame houses shrines to the best 700 aquatic athletes in history, including historic gold medals, swimsuits and other equipment, plus unique pools and diving wells. There are also historical artifacts dating back hundreds of years, such as Benjamin Franklin's swimming paddles, as well as swimming art displays and rotating exhibits.

Before it became a football town, Santa Clara's sports identity was largely shaped by the 62-year-old Santa Clara Swim Center across town from the new stadium. The swim club has trained dozens of Olympic medal winners, including Mark Spitz, and has held 45 international competitions featuring superstars such as Michael Phelps.

"We were known as the swim capital of the world," said former City Councilman Kevin Moore, who sits on the local committee trying to land the hall of fame.

"The best thing we can do to recapture that is to bring all the history to our town. It's such an attraction for us to get it."

Moore, whose letter to the 49ers started the process of moving the NFL team south last decade, has been working behind the scenes to bring the swimming hall of fame to Santa Clara for the last seven years, Wigo said. But interest really picked up after construction on the \$1.2 billion stadium began a year ago and the hall of fame's 50-year lease in Florida inched toward expiring.

City leaders say the hall of fame would fit nicely in what they hope will be a burgeoning north-side tourist center that also includes Great America, Hilton and Hyatt hotels, as well as plans for a Joe Montana hotel and restaurant and a huge Santana Row-style entertainment center.

"I think they won't have a problem being able to sustain the foot traffic and attendance that they're looking" for, said John Bitter, head coach and CEO of the Santa Clara Swim Club, predicting his club could team up with the hall of fame for events. "As much as football's been the headlines of our city right now ... it won't be football; it will be aquatics. It's another way to rally civic pride in the aquatic community that's already here."



George Haines, former coach for Santa Clara High, Santa Clara Swim Club and the Olympic team, stands with his San Jose Hall of Fame plaque. (Jim Gensheimer)