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Round Rock ISD Looks to Sell Stadium Name

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The cash-strapped Round Rock school district is looking to put someone's name in lights on its new stadium -- for a price.

The district has sent letters to about 80 businesses -- local and national -- offering naming rights to the new \$19 million, 11,000-seat athletics stadium on Parmer Lane.

Bidding to name the stadium that is home to Westwood and McNeil high schools starts at \$2 million. The winning business will have its name emblazoned on the stadium's sign and scoreboard for 10 years. The money would go into the district's general fund. The practice of selling naming rights to corporations is common in professional sports -- Dell Diamond in Round Rock and Houston's Toyota Center are recent examples -- but new territory for public schools. The Forney school district near Dallas recently renamed its stadium in a \$1 million, 15-year deal with City Bank. Another Dallas-area district, Highland Park, is asking \$10 million to rename Highlander Stadium. The Carroll school district near Fort Worth also is looking to sell naming rights to its stadium. Round Rock officials said the move is necessary to make up for the \$17 million it must give to poorer school districts under the state's school funding formula. Round Rock voters approved the new stadium in 2000.

A citizens committee came up with the idea and several other moneymaking proposals in January. Other ideas included selling ads on school buses -- a concept that's still in the works -- and selling advertising space on the stadium's new scoreboard. Pepsi has already bought a \$250,000 scoreboard ad.

Businesses will have to decide whether the stadium will draw enough attention to justify the \$2 million price tag, said Jef Richards, a University of Texas advertising professor.

"The only way you can price this thing is, how many people are going to see it?" he said. "If they have a lot of games there and a lot of people going in and out year round, it's going to be worth a lot."

Reg Stansbury, Round Rock's purchasing director, said he's optimistic about the initiative.

"We have seen it succeed in other venues," he said. "We don't have any reason not to think we can sell the naming rights."

He added that the district will not consider bids from companies that sell alcohol, tobacco or firearms and will try to keep stadium advertising from being too garish.

"We don't want to totally commercialize our district," he said.

There are no plans to rename the district's other stadium, Dragon Stadium, which sits on Round Rock High School property and is named after the school's football team, Stansbury said.

As for prospective buyers, Stansbury said the district has sent a letter to computer giant Dell Inc. but is keeping its options open.

"From a purchasing perspective, we don't favor anybody," he said. "Whether or not it would be Dell, it would be nice to have someone of that stature in the community."

Dell officials did not return calls Wednesday.

Officials with the similarly cash-strapped Eanes school district said they are intrigued by Round Rock's plan.

Eanes Chief Financial Officer Tom Zimmerer said he supports the movement. Next year, Eanes will give about \$55 million to poorer districts and will face a \$4.5 million deficit. The district recently remodeled its Chaparral Stadium and renamed the field Ebby Neptune Field after a retired Westlake High School football coach. Eanes sells about \$60,000 a year in stadium advertising.

"If we didn't have Ebby Neptune on ours, we'd probably be advertising," he said. "Now, if they (Round Rock officials) get \$2 million, I'll talk to Coach Neptune."

Austin schools spokeswoman Kathy Anthony said that despite the district's strained finances, there has been no talk of putting stadium names up for sale.

"We name our facilities after people who have made significant contributions to education in general or to AISD," she said. "This is written district policy."

Stansbury said that in this era of budget cuts, attitudes might change.

"There's not that many school districts that have tried it, but I think you'll find more and more will have to look to these opportunities as operating costs increase," he said.

Round Rock school board Trustee Raymond Hartfield said he supports the initiative and hasn't heard from any naysayers.

"We believe that for some time we have under-marketed some of the valuable assets of the school district," he said. "Naming a stadium is definitely one of those.

"It reduces taxes, that's what it does," he said.

Round Rock athletic director Kelly Reeves said he's not sure what to expect when -- or if -- the bids come rolling in. Companies have until Dec. 9 to make an offer.

"It may be worth \$10 million to some people," he said. "It's kind of like a Rembrandt."