

CHARLOTTE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Local executives, sports analysts bullish on possible ACC HQ move to Charlotte



Clemson coach Dabo Swinney celebrates winning the 2017 ACC Championship at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte. Melissa Key

By Erik Spanberg and Collin Huguley – Charlotte Business Journal – October 27, 2021

Reading the criteria for the Atlantic Coast Conference’s search for a future headquarters feels like the lead-in to a Jeopardy question: “What is Charlotte?”

The conference disclosed yesterday what its 15-member school presidents will look at closest when considering whether the ACC stays in its current location — Greensboro — or goes elsewhere. The conference wants a city in the Eastern time zone; one with a growing and diverse population; access to a hub airport; a place that will benefit the ACC’s brand and provide cachet and access to current and prospective sponsors; and a city that allows for reasonable operating costs.

Now, it's up to Charlotte business and political leaders to close a deal in the months ahead.

"They've set the criteria out there for everybody to see," Johnny Harris, CEO of real estate firm Lincoln Harris, told *CBJ* on Wednesday. "And in doing so, it becomes fairly obvious to anybody that's looked at it that Charlotte would be one of the cities that could meet those criteria."

Harris has a lengthy history of recruiting major sporting events to this area, including the ACC Football Championship and the ACC men's basketball tournament. He chairs the board of the nonprofit Charlotte Sports Foundation, operator of the Duke's Mayo Classic and the Duke's Mayo Bowl, annual college football games played at Bank of America Stadium featuring ACC teams.

If he is involved in recruiting the ACC headquarters — Harris declined to confirm or deny whether he has been asked to do so — Harris said he would not do so on behalf of his real estate firm. Others at Lincoln Harris could pursue site selection, he added. For Harris, the goal would be to find a way to get the ACC to choose "Charlotte, period."

An ACC spokesperson did not respond to requests for comment. Earlier this month, ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips spoke with the *CBJ* but declined to speculate on potential relocation sites because the conference's 15-member board of directors had yet to decide whether to look beyond Greensboro when considering long-term headquarters plans.

Greensboro has been home to the ACC since the league's founding in 1953. It started with seven schools, including four in North Carolina: Duke, North Carolina, N.C. State and Wake Forest. Six months after the ACC was created, an eighth school — Virginia — was added. All are still in the conference.

Expansion and consolidation in college sports spurred the ACC to expand rapidly in the 2000s, pushing membership to 15 schools stretching from Miami to Boston.

"We wanted to give Greensboro the respect to see if this would open up to other cities," Tracy Dodson, Charlotte assistant city manager and head of economic development, told *CBJ*. "Our No. 1 focus is that the ACC stays in North Carolina, and we think Charlotte could have a great opportunity."

Dodson said it's likely that city and county government leaders will be part of a pitch for the headquarters that includes corporate executives and groups such as the sports foundation. She declined to discuss possible incentives in detail but said the city "would want to put its best foot forward in this pursuit."

The conference office has 50 employees and is unlikely to be adding more, meaning job-development grants are off the table as potential incentives. There are other inducements the state and local government could offer, though.

Two consultants are helping the ACC with dual but separate assessments of strategy and operations and the headquarters site analysis: Weiberg Consultants and national commercial real estate advisory firm Newmark Group, respectively. Newmark is leading what the ACC described as an “objective, data driven comparison and evaluation.”

The next phase, including cities outside Greensboro, will culminate with a recommendation from Newmark to the ACC board and a deciding vote on what to pursue next. No timetable for a decision was mentioned.

National and local experts agree that it would be a surprise if the ACC were to leave behind its deep roots in North Carolina. John Boyd, a national site-selection consultant based in Boca Raton, Florida, sees Charlotte and Raleigh as the two most likely and attractive candidates. Both meet the conference’s desire to locate in a growth area with proximity and access to ACC schools. They offer more manageable relocations for current executives and employees, Boyd said, as opposed to potential headquarters spots in other states.

“Charlotte offers ease of transferees as well as it is a desirable location for new recruits,” Boyd said.

Brett Gray, managing principal for Cushman & Wakefield’s Charlotte office, sees the Queen City as a stronger candidate than Raleigh. The market is bigger, and the center city is less spread out, he said. The access to sports facilities in the city and conference spaces, combined with walkability, brings something Raleigh doesn’t, Gray said.

One of the ACC’s criteria for its new headquarters is access to a large hub airport. The Greensboro and Raleigh airports “just don’t compete” with Charlotte Douglas International Airport, Gray said, especially with the current expansions.

CLT is home to American Airlines’ second-largest hub and has 180 nonstop flights. Raleigh-Durham International Airport had 57 nonstop routes prior to the pandemic and now has 38, according to the RDU website. Piedmont Triad International Airport, which serves Greensboro, has 16 nonstops.

Lack of direct service is important for ACC school representatives, sponsors and media partners who make trips to visit league executives. In terms of where the ACC could locate a headquarters, Gray thinks the conference could look for something different from its current space. The ACC owns its nearly 20,000-square-foot home base, which is 7 miles southwest of downtown Greensboro.

“I would not be surprised if they leased space,” Gray said. “I would not be surprised if they went more into the urban core than what their past behavior is and that they would expand. I think what we’re looking at is closer to 40,000 square feet, approximately, that they are looking at. Certainly that is subject to change, with an initial target geography of uptown and South End potentially.”

Throughout its history, the ACC has played neutral-site men's basketball games and conference tournaments in Charlotte. More recently, the city has become home to the conference's annual football championship game, played at the NFL stadium uptown on the first weekend of December. The football championship has been hosted by Charlotte since 2010 and is under contract through 2030.

The ACC men's basketball tournament was last played here in 2019. This year, the conference baseball tournament returned to the area for the first time in two decades and played at Truist Field uptown. It is going to be played in Charlotte again in 2022. Men's and women's basketball media days and football media days are held in Charlotte, too.

Business partners including Raycom Sports and ESPN have headquarters or satellite offices in Charlotte.

"It would have to be Charlotte's to lose," Signature Sports Group principal Steve Hall said. Signature Sports is based in Charlotte and works extensively in college sports on promotions and sponsorships. The company does not work for the ACC.

Mike Boykin, co-founder of marketing firm Bespoke Sports & Entertainment, said a move to Charlotte would make sense "because it's the heartbeat of the ACC. It makes perfect sense."

Boykin and Hall cited the airport and corporate sector as obvious draws.

"Nobody's going to look at the ACC negatively for being in Greensboro, but they are going to look at the ACC more positively if it's in Charlotte," ESPN college football analyst Paul Finebaum told *CBJ*. Finebaum hosts a daily talk show on ESPN's Ballantyne-based SEC Network. "It feels like you would be modernizing the league — you wouldn't still be sitting in someone's basement in Greensboro."

Jay Bilas, ESPN's lead college basketball analyst and a Charlotte resident, told *CBJ*, "It seems like Charlotte, given the sponsor base, would be a good thought. The footprint of the conference is totally different than it was 20 years ago."

Phillips, the ACC commissioner, said in a prepared statement this week that the outside consultants have continued "to provide us with the necessary, objective information to make decisions in the best interests of our conference, and we're confident in their ongoing work."

"In terms of the newly recalibrated economic development team in place in Charlotte and the mayor's economic development legacy, this would be an economic development trophy for their mantle," said Boyd, the national site-selection consultant.