

Grizzlies send big rent check to Fresno City Hall, but future remains unclear

By George
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Fresno Grizzlies' Darren Ford loosens up before his at bat during the final home game against the Tacoma Rainiers on Labor Day.

GARY KAZANJIAN — Fresno Bee Staff Photo [Buy Photo](#)

This is how crazy things have gotten in the Chukchansi casino mess — the Fresno Grizzlies are now the drama's financial role model.

City officials wondered this week if events triggered by the stunning closure of the tribe's Madera County casino might someday force them to boot the Grizzlies out of the city-owned downtown stadium for unpaid rent.

On Friday those same city officials were all smiles after the Grizzlies, in one fell swoop, cut their outstanding balance by a whopping \$1.25 million.

The Grizzlies gave City Hall a rent check for \$750,000 and paperwork for rent credits that figure to cut the tab by another \$500,000. Only Travis Ishikawa's home run produced a more sudden change in human emotion.

"Any check for \$750,000 and made out to the city of Fresno is a pleasant way for the city manager to end the week," City Manager Bruce Rudd said.

Grizzlies Executive Vice President Derek Franks said the team is making plans to finish off the remaining balance

(\$194,699) at the same time it prepares for a 2015 season as the new affiliate of the Houston Astros.

“I’m real optimistic about the direction we’re headed,” Franks said.

Yet, Yogi Berra was right about life off as well as on the baseball field when he said it ain’t over till it’s over. Pro baseball in Fresno remains full of uncertainty.

The most obvious concern involves Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino.

Government officials on Oct. 9 locked all the doors after rival tribal factions tangled inside the casino. Handguns were drawn. A false fire alarm was pulled. State and federal officials saw a public endangered by a tribal leadership that had lost its bearings.

Federal Judge Lawrence J. O’Neill on Wednesday told all sides to talk. But for the next two weeks, and perhaps much longer, the casino-resort operation that reportedly takes in \$100 million-plus a year will be shuttered.

This picture got City Hall and Grizzlies officials thinking of their interests at the speed of a bang-bang double play.

The tribe pays the team \$1 million a year for stadium naming rights. Even with the deal, the Grizzlies lose \$1 million a year. The Grizzlies are constantly behind on rent. City Hall always needs money. Grizzlies owners are desperate to sell the team at top dollar. City Hall is even more desperate to see them sell. No millionaire wannabe baseball magnate in his or her right mind is going to pay top dollar for a minor-league team that can’t seem to make money, has a long-term stadium lease with annual rent varying between \$750,000 and \$1.5 million and suddenly finds itself burdened with a flailing naming-rights partner whose money-making machine is in serious need of repair.

All three of the main players don’t know what to do for the simple reason that things now are largely outside their control.

Members of one of the Chukchansi factions stood near the Robert E. Coyle federal courthouse before Wednesday’s hearing and wished Oct. 9 had never occurred. They said the tribe weeks earlier had paid the Grizzlies \$1 million, assuring the status quo for the stadium’s name through next season. What about another \$1 million next September? Tribal members were in no mood to ponder that far ahead. They want only to get on Judge Lawrence J. O’Neill’s good side.

Council Member Lee Brand chews incessantly on Grizzlies issues. Should City Hall vow to kick the Grizzlies out of the stadium because they don’t pay rent on time? Bad idea, Brand said, because that would free the tribe from the naming-rights deal, making the Grizzlies less attractive to potential buyers. Should City Hall cut the Grizzlies’ rent to, say, \$150,000 a year? Do that with the current ownership still in place, Brand said, and the longed-for sale may never happen.

Brand said the Grizzlies might be worth \$15 million with a stable tribe standing solid behind a naming-rights deal that runs through 2021, and about half that if Chukchansi’s gaming empire collapses. Better to lie low and see how things shake out, he said.

Knocking \$1.25 million off their rent bill gives the Grizzlies some breathing room. But their stadium tab grows at a \$125,000-per-month clip. The next \$1 million naming-rights check is a long way off. And the front office must get a handle on selling the 2015 Grizzlies to a region still peeved that the San Francisco Giants pulled their affiliation from the Grizzlies.

Franks, almost alone among officials in the Chukchansi-City Hall-Grizzlies dance, sees opportunity to act this fall. He can hardly wait to market the Astros connection.

“It’s something different, something new,” Franks said. “We’re excited about it.”

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