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Five reasons to package Nets, Isles in Nassau

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Here is a logical solution that will not displace a single person from his or her Brooklyn apartment, will offer LeBron James a chance to be near his favorite borough and will end the longest-running wandering saga in New York sports.

It is time, finally, after 41 years and six stops, to give the Nets a permanent home. And no, it is not the most expensive arena in the world, the planned \$950-million Barclays Center in the very iffy \$4-billion Atlantic Yards development in Brooklyn.

The real answer is to bring them home once and for all to the new Nassau Coliseum.

No offense to developer Bruce Ratner or his dream of building a lavish new Nets-oriented community in Brooklyn, and not to throw cold water on the euphoria from a big win in court and a hint from James that he might sign with the team in two years. But economic experts have said in the past few weeks that the shaky economy and new rules about tax-exempt bonds are going to make it tougher than ever to build the Nets' palace. And it hasn't exactly been going full steam up to now.

At some point, the Nets might very well be desperate for a home again, as they have been on and off since they started in 1967. We have just the place.

A refurbished Coliseum is part of the Lighthouse Project, the pride and joy of Islanders owner Charles Wang and his partner, Long Island real estate whiz Scott Rechler. Like Atlantic Yards, the Lighthouse would be a commercial, sports and real estate complex with a strong component of affordable housing. Unlike Atlantic Yards, it is priced at \$2 billion.

Granted, it has been years since I was on the junior high math team, but I'm still good enough with figures to know that \$2 billion is a lot less than \$4 billion. The problem is that the Lighthouse is going nowhere fast, following the glacier's pace that many Long Island projects take. A commitment from the Nets could give it the oomph it needs.

"You'd like to think the New York Islanders' brand and what Charles Wang has done to keep the team on Long Island would be enough to get a shovel in the ground after all this time," said Chris Botta, who resigned recently as a public relations executive for the Islanders (and has no stake in the Lighthouse). "But sure, it's fair to say LeBron James and the return of the New York Nets would put the project over the top."

Here are five good reasons why it is a good idea:

1. Economics. They did everything but break out champagne and plan an NBA championship parade down Flatbush Avenue after recent developments. The Nets traded their best player, Richard Jefferson,

just to clear salary-cap space in time for 2010, when James can be a free agent. Then James, appearing with the U.S. Olympic team in Manhattan, said Brooklyn is his favorite borough in the city. He alluded to his close relationship with Jay-Z, the rap music mogul who is a partner with Ratner in the Nets.

On top of that, the U.S. Supreme Court recently declined to hear an appeal by property owners and tenants whose homes and businesses would be taken over and demolished to make way for Atlantic Yards. Ratner, in a statement, said, "The opponents have now lost 20 court decisions relating to Atlantic Yards, and we now are one step closer to making these benefits a reality for the borough and the city."

But if you've followed the Nets, you know their winning streaks don't last long. In the past two weeks, publications, including this one, have detailed new IRS proposals against using tax-exempt bonds for private enterprises. Economists interviewed for the stories said Ratner has been relying heavily on the prospect of those bonds. Also, Ratner got his plan approved before the economy went down the tubes.

Now, who knows? An Atlantic Yards spokesman said he still expects a groundbreaking in the fall. But we've heard that one before. Property owners say they are going to state court, which suggests that, at the very least, there will be more delays.

If the project fizzles, Ratner's interest in owning the Nets likely will wither with it. If he puts them on the market, someone will buy them. Recession or not, there is no shortage of people who want to own sports franchises. Does Wang have enough cash left after losing \$20 million a year on his hockey team? The guy loves basketball and has a court at home and courtside seats at the Knicks. In any case, a smart owner would keep Jay-Z on board.

2. Politics. Let's put this politely. Taxpayers, frantic about building a new home for the Islanders' "youth movement," are not exactly storming Hempstead Town Hall. Trading down twice in the first round of the NHL draft did not set the grass roots ablaze. No one will be calling the new Coliseum "The House that Josh Bailey Built."

If, on the other hand, the Lighthouse group could go to Nassau County and town officials with a package deal - two major-league teams - they would have clout.

3. Rivalry. The juice never has flown in Nets-Knicks games. Maybe the Knicks took the starch out of the Nets when they charged a \$4-million indemnity to join the NBA in 1976 and another \$4 million to move from Long Island to New Jersey a year later. A true New York-New York race would have to be better than what we've seen. Word has it that the Coliseum is fertile ground for a rivalry with a Manhattan team.

To be sure, if the Atlantic Yards plan falls through, the Nets are going to have to leave the Meadowlands. They have worn out their welcome as lame ducks, offering season tickets to businesses on a buy-one-get-one-free basis.

4. Symmetry. The Nets really built Nassau Coliseum. They were the ones in business when shovels went in the ground in the early 1970s. It would be neat to see them help rebuild it. The Coliseum is where the Nets had their greatest artistic successes (Rick Barry and Dr. J trumped the thumpings Jason Kidd's Nets took in the NBA Finals).

Also, owner Roy Boe once used Islanders money to sustain the drowning Nets. At the time, Newsday's Joe Gergen described it this way: "Robbing Potvin to pay Paultz."

How nice if the Nets could help save the Islanders now. The Nets owe them one.

5. A Mulligan. Long Island whiffed on pro basketball the first time. We're not talking about the 1976-77 season, their first in the NBA, after Boe sold Julius Erving and left people no good reason to watch. The real offense by the public was in not appreciating how good the ABA was.

As Erving told this reporter years ago: "Professionally speaking, I don't think there ever was a total sense of proprietorship between the Nets and the whole Island. We'd get those 8- or 9,000 consistently, but it wasn't as though it was Long Island's team. Long Island never embraced the Nets the way it should have."

No argument there. Give us another shot. Pro basketball is much bigger now and Long Island will do better. If the Nets promise not to hold the empty seats in the old days against us, we'll promise not to bring up the fact that they drafted Yinka Dare.

Let's try again. Bring back the Nets. Call Dr. J to be a goodwill ambassador. And tell LeBron that once he gets on the Southern State, it's a short drive to Brooklyn.

The never-ending odyssey of the Nets:

1 1967-68 Teaneck Armory, Teaneck, N.J. (team was known as the New Jersey Americans).

2 Spring, 1968 Americans have one-game playoff with Kentucky Colonels to determine final spot in the postseason, Armory is unavailable, so they move it to Long Island Arena in Commack. The Americans have to forfeit because the floor is unplayable.

1968-69 Naturally, the team moves to Commack.

3 1969-1972 Island Garden, West Hempstead.

4 1972-1977 Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale.

5 1977-1981 Rutgers Athletic Center, Piscataway, N.J.

6 1981-present Brendan Byrne Arena/Continental Airlines Arena/Izod Center, East Rutherford, N.J.

7 2005 Nets announce plans to move to Brooklyn.

2008 Nets announce that the move will be in 2010 at the earliest.

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