

Chivas USA soccer team may build fields in Santa Ana for youth

The city's mayor discloses that talks have been in the works to replace an aging golf course. The team's co-owner says the Major League Soccer team is not considering moving, at least not yet.

By Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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After months of speculation by soccer fans and meetings with city officials, [Chivas USA](#) of Major League Soccer confirmed it is in talks to build fields and possibly a stadium for youth at an aging golf course in Santa Ana.

The team's conversations with the city were made public at a State of the City address by Santa Ana Mayor Miguel Pulido this week. The talks have been going on for months.

"We're talking about working on soccer programs, youth programs, and what we can do that is vibrant and challenging," Pulido said in the speech, hinting at the plans by joking, "I hope none of you play golf there" and making the suggestive observation that "soccer is a very big sport today in the city."

The Carson-based team's co-owner, Antonio Cue, said the proposed youth soccer facility could include as many as seven soccer fields and a 2,000 to 3,000-seat stadium at Willowick, now a 102-acre golf course on the city's western border with Garden Grove. But a detailed proposal is months away.

Cue did not rule out that the site could eventually be a permanent home for the professional team. "We're only talking right now about the youth, we haven't thought about moving the team," Cue said. "We're open to possibilities, but not in the short term."

The prospect of the team raising its profile in Santa Ana has fueled speculation among soccer fans that Chivas USA itself was contemplating a move to the city.

"To have a team that is owned by Mexicans have more of a presence in Santa Ana would give us a lot of pride," said Daniel Albarrán, a clerk at Deportes Salazar, a soccer supplies chain store.

In Santa Ana, one of the largest predominantly Latino cities in America, soccer is a near obsession for many, tempered only by a short supply of fields to play on.

Albarrán said he first heard rumblings two months ago that a deal with Chivas was in the works, and said now that plans for a proposed youth facility are public, he is supportive. Chivas USA tickets are one of his best selling items.

The Mexican sister team, Club Deportivo de Guadalajara, also known as Chivas, enjoys widespread support among die-hard fans, especially immigrants from its home state of Jalisco, and gear emblazoned with Chivas de Guadalajara sells well, he said. However, Chivas USA gear is in such low demand that now it is only offered only on special order.

Edgar Vazquez, president of InterAmerica, one of Santa Ana's largest adult soccer leagues, said he didn't think Chivas USA had reached the level of renown to carry out such an ambitious soccer center just yet.

"Their popularity is not going to come overnight," he said, also questioning the motives of the team. "Our community is not going to receive anything back from this. They're just trying to make money."

But the proposal is complicated by the fact that the golf course is owned by neighboring Garden Grove. That city is already negotiating with Santa Ana and Hard Rock International to develop a music-themed amusement park on a portion site.

Willowick Golf Course has long been on the radar of politicians and entrepreneurs, who've envisioned grandiose, yet quick-to-evaporate projects, including a National Football League stadium and a Latin American-themed amusement park called Las Americas.

Chivas USA was founded in 2004, banking on the idea that legions of fans of the wildly popular Mexican team would support a local franchise with nearly the same name. The teams share a co-owner, Mexican businessman and film producer Jorge Vergara, and the team found a home at Home Depot Center, the home field for the L.A. Galaxy.

The team, which played its first game in 2005, is locked into a contract to play in Carson until 2009. The team has had trouble building a fan base and filling the stadium regularly. Its average home game attendance last season was 14,300; Home Depot Center holds 27,000.

Chivas USA has youth soccer centers in Bell Gardens and San Bernardino, and two of its elite youth teams play their home games at the city stadium in downtown Santa Ana.

Alfredo Pado, a 35-year-old factory worker and Chivas USA fan from Garden Grove, said he welcomes the possibility of a greater Chivas presence in Orange County. He goes to as many games as possible in Carson and laments that more clinics and games are not offered near his home.

"There are a lot of Chivas fans in Orange County, but every time we want to go to a soccer clinic we have to go to Los Angeles or the San Fernando Valley," he said.

Pulido said the city's interest in the project is because of the need for more soccer fields, training, balls, uniforms and equipment for inner-city youth. "We have a lot of people here who want to play soccer, and play more often," he said.

In the last several years, two proposals to give local soccer clubs free or priority use of Santa Ana city soccer fields to start elite youth soccer programs dissolved after the educational and scholarship programs the groups promised didn't materialize.

But those proposals had not entailed building new facilities.

Chivas USA co-owner Cue said that Santa Ana's large population of soccer fans and young people make the city an attractive location.

"We believe that through a youth program you can educate," he said.

"But we also believe it pays off with a fan base in the future."