

SportsQuest ousts CEO

Struggling Chesterfield project is on hold as new board considers options

BY LOUIS LLOVIO AND JEREMY SLAYTON

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Steve Burton, the man behind SportsQuest, has been ousted as head of the Chesterfield County sports venture by shareholders and board members concerned about mounting money problems and lawsuits.

Burton, who first announced his vision for the world-class sporting venue in December 2008, has been replaced as CEO.

The project has been put on temporary hold as a newly constituted board of directors evaluates its options.

The move was none too late for critics of the project who long have complained that Burton's vision for SportsQuest was too grandiose and that coming up with the money would be difficult.

"I had major concerns about the

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Steve Burton

implied the decision was mutual.

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SportsQuest

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direction" SportsQuest was headed in, said Dudley Duncan, an early investor who has been picked to head SportsQuest on an interim basis.

Burton implied the decision for him to leave was mutual.

"In order to convey a genuine intention for change, a move was made with the hope that it would send a strong message to the community that change is real and that that might help solicit local support," Burton said

Tuesday afternoon.

Duncan, a longtime area swim coach, described a board insurrection. He is head coach at Chesterfield-based Quest Aquatic Center and is president of the pool management company SwimMetro Management Inc. He said that he quit SportsQuest's three-person board in January because of mounting concern for how the organization was being run.

SportsQuest, once envisioned as a 250-acre Olympicstyle athletic village, has been only partially developed and has been beset by financial troubles. The only development to date has been on lighted soccer fields, concession and bathroom facilities.

Several contractors have filed mechanic's liens for work on the property. The state has sued the company over the way it marketed its fitness center memberships. And the landlord of the building where the fitness center temporarily was housed has evicted the company.

Shortly after Duncan and a second board member quit, they began talking with lawyers on how to proceed.

Duncan would not name the board member who quit along with him — Burton was the third board member — and said he was authorized to speak for SportsQuest's new leadership.

The two former board members approached shareholders at a meeting in late February or early March to discuss options, Duncan said.

Shareholders decided to create a restructured board that took control March 21. It is unclear who the shareholders are and who sits on the new board, other than Duncan and someone from Burton's investment fund.

That board replaced Burton on March 22, Duncan said.

Burton would not answer directly when asked if the decision for him to leave was contentious.

"I'm not going to try to classify it. It's too complicated to (describe) in one word," he said.

Burton also declined to discuss how SportsQuest's finances got to the point where lawsuits are a bigger topic than sporting events. He said he would discuss the matter at some future point.

He said Tuesday that funding has been a challenge for the development and that the new board is looking at its options.

"We're conducting a financial audit as we speak," he said.

Duncan would not rule out the possibility of filing for bankruptcy reorganization but said it was too early in the process to make any decisions.

Some say the athletic complex off Genito Road that features 12 multipurpose, synthetic-turf fields is an asset for the Richmond region because it boosts sports tourism.

Scott Turner, executive director of the Richmond Strikers Soccer Club, called the complex "the most cuttingedge" facility built for youth sports in America.

"I think our area should applaud Steve's vision and thank him for what he's built," Turner said.

Several tournaments scheduled to play on SportsQuest's fields will not be affected by these latest moves, Duncan said.

“Most everything else had come, more or less, to a stop on its own,” he said.

The Richmond Strikers host two tournaments that have games played on the SportsQuest fields — the recently completed Jefferson Cup and the Capital Fall Classic this autumn.

Neither tournament is in jeopardy because of SportsQuest’s tenuous footing, Turner said, noting that the soccer club has had a strong relationship with Burton.

“The SportsQuest complex ... he has built has really proven to be a huge benefit for our tournaments,” he said. “We hope to continue to support the complex and the Chesterfield business community by continuing to host events down there.”

Though the project is temporarily on hold, some Chesterfield officials haven’t given up hope on it.

James M. “Jim” Holland, who represents the Dale District on the county’s Board of Supervisors, said he remains “hopeful and optimistic” that the SportsQuest project will move forward.

The turmoil at SportsQuest hasn’t escaped notice among county leaders. Chesterfield spent \$4.3 million on the project to lease space on fields and for a recreation center.

While its investment is wellprotected — the county holds the first lien on the property, so if it fails, Chesterfield gets a partially developed sports complex — it is still fighting the perception that SportsQuest is a county facility.

The county has use of nine multipurpose synthetic athletic fields on Mondays through Thursdays and on one weekend a year.

This year, Chesterfield exercised its weekend option to use the fields to host games in February for the inaugural Ultimate Cup soccer tournament.

“The county feels very pleased that our kids are making use of some great fields ... and expect that to continue,” said County Administrator James J.L. “Jay” Stegmaier.

As for Burton, the financial realities of the situation have done nothing to diminish his vision of the project.

“It’ll take the effort of many people willing to work together,” he said.

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R. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

The Richmond Kickers girls youth soccer team (in red) played

P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

The Richmond Kickers girls youth soccer team (in red) played against Beach FC, from Virginia Beach, during the Ultimate Cup tournament at SportsQuest in February.