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Wilkens a Sonic again — as vice chairman

By Jayda Evans

Seattle Times staff reporter

The Sonics and Storm finally found a local tie to anchor new owner Clay Bennett's pledge to keep the teams in the area, announcing the appointment of legend Lenny Wilkens as vice chairman of the Professional Basketball Club.

Wilkens, 69, will retain his position as color analyst for the FSN broadcast team, but his new job will pull from his years as an NBA player, coach and executive. As vice chairman, Wilkens is part of senior management, and he'll oversee community relations and business activities. He'll also serve as an advisor for the ownership group on basketball operations, but clarified that his coaching days are over.

"New York was enough," said Wilkens, who coached the Knicks from 2004-05. "It was the finishing touch, so to speak.

"When I met Clay and saw what the franchise was going through ... to be a part of helping them become what we think they can be, that to me is more exciting. That's a great challenge."

Bennett announced the hiring of an architectural firm on Wednesday, so Wilkens' first duties will be surveying the potential sites and helping to configure a building that can house the NBA, WNBA, NHL and political conventions, plus other events. Although his family has stayed tied to the area since Wilkens first arrived in Seattle as a player in 1968, Wilkens said he's not familiar with all the potential sites for a facility.

Wilkens, a Hall of Fame coach and player, lives in Bellevue and said he believes moving the team to a suburb wouldn't affect how people perceive the Sonics.

"We're all Seattleites," he said. "I've never heard anyone say, 'I'm a Bellevue-ite.' "

Wilkens said his pitch in getting more steam behind an arena to prevent the teams from relocating to Oklahoma City, where all of the owners are based, would key on benefits such as employment, entertainment and being viewed as a first-class city.

"I know what the fan support can be and I've always wanted to see that again," said Wilkens, whose 1979 team won the NBA championship and hosted a parade in Seattle that attracted 300,000 people. "That makes it even more intriguing. But I think anytime you sell a franchise, there's always that hesitation by people to see what's going to happen and how's the team going to do. It's a natural thing. We just have to let people know we're for real and we do want this franchise to be here.

"We're not taking anything for granted. Too often that's the moniker that goes with sports franchises is that they've always got their hand out, and we want to change that a little bit."

Wilkens began discussing the possibility of joining Bennett's PBC once the sale was announced in July. Wilkens had turned down a long-term contract with FSN at the time, but said it was unrelated to possibly joining upper management.

Bennett said there will be more additions to the management team in the near future.

"Lenny is someone that I've been a fan of as a player and coach," Bennett said. "When I met him, I felt this is an individual that would be a value to our business."

Sonics general manager Rick Sund and coach Bob Hill's positions will not change, and Wilkens doesn't plan on meddling with their responsibilities, but said he will be available to both.

Sund attended the news conference to congratulate Wilkens.

"He brings a wealth of knowledge in all of these areas," Sund said. "I think it's great because I like to get as much information as I can before making decisions, because the decisions themselves are tough enough. It will be especially nice for Bob Hill because he's got a young staff. This is a really positive move for the Sonics organization."

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