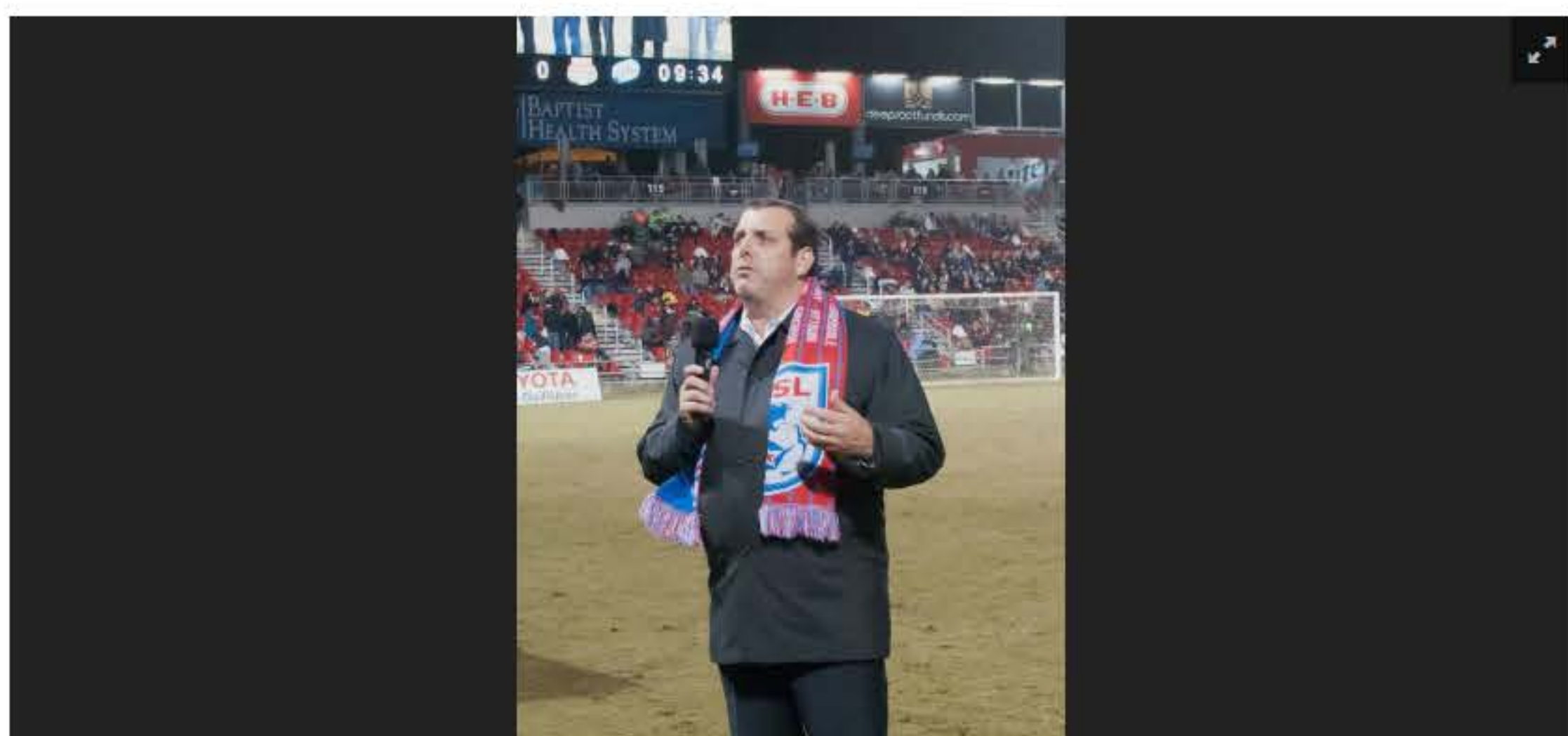




Sports Business

Pelé's return? Pro soccer league kicks for Bay Area franchise



Bill Peterson, pictured at the North American Soccer League championship game: San Francisco is "a hip and happening place."

By **Ron Leuty** – Staff Reporter, San Francisco Business Times

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Two potential ownership groups are vying for a Bay Area franchise in the second-division North American Soccer League.

The NASL is best known in connection with pro soccer's surge in popularity in the United States in the 1970s.

Despite the name – and a team called the New York Cosmos – the 11-team men's league has no connection to the original NASL, no Pelé and little chance of competing head-to-head with Major League Soccer's San Jose Earthquakes.

"We revived the history, but we're forging our own way," said NASL Commissioner **Bill Peterson**.

The would-be Bay Area team has no owner or place to play – yet – but Peterson said San Francisco is "a city that holds a lot of interest for us."

Without naming names, Peterson said one ownership group includes locals; the other is a "foreign ownership group." The four-year-old league, he said, could make a decision to award a franchise to one of the groups in "the next couple months."

If that happens quickly, there's a chance the team could begin play next season. More likely a decision will come after April, setting the team's debut for 2017.

"When you look at the makeup (of the Bay Area economy) – tech and finance – all of that is very attractive from a league perspective," Peterson said. "It's a robust economy. It's a changing landscape: Silicon Valley has moved more into San Francisco. It's a hip and happening place."

The demographics of the Bay Area match those who follow pro soccer, Peterson said: "They're young professionals who grew up with soccer. This is their sport."

The NASL, currently without a team on the West Coast, plans to grow to 20 teams. Those teams pay a \$3.5 million admission fee, with team operating expenses of roughly \$2.5 million to \$4 million a year.

The NASL is flexible regarding a Bay Area location, but Peterson said the first choice would be San Francisco proper. That depends a lot, he added, on the ownership group's financial wherewithal, short-term and long-term stadium plans, a nod from city government officials and support from business leaders.

"The advantage of the (NASL) model is we're able to compete at a high level and have low costs compared to other leagues and sports," Peterson said.

Still, it remains to be seen if the NASL can compete with the better-known, first-division MLS, including the Earthquakes. The team, which averaged 14,947 fans per game last year, is set to open the home season March 22 in new, 18,000-seat Avaya Stadium.

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