

Beckham backer moving, but focus still on MLS team in Miami

By Craig Davis, Staff Writer

The relocation of one of **David Beckham's** principal backers out of state should not alter the chances of a **Major League Soccer** franchise coming to fruition in Miami.

Marcelo Claure, appointed Wednesday as president and CEO of Sprint, will be moving to the Kansas City area to run the telecommunications giant based in Overland Park, Kan. But he will keep his home in Miami, maintain a foothold in the community and remains committed to securing a stadium site and establishing the MLS expansion team in South Florida, according to a spokesman for Beckham United.

"Marcelo remains completely passionate about Miami, passionate about soccer and he looks forward to bringing a world-class MLS team to Miami with David, Simon Fuller and the team," said Tadd Schwartz, of Schwartz Media Strategies. "That has been his goal since he started and that remains his goal. Nothing will change."

It was Claure, founder of Brightstar Corp., who sold Beckham on the idea of establishing his MLS team in Miami. The native of Bolivia had previously attempted to accomplish that in a partnership with FC Barcelona, but the effort was abandoned in 2009.

Another opportunity arose with Beckham, who had an option in his contract with the Los Angeles Galaxy to purchase a MLS expansion franchise upon retiring as a player. After concluding his career in 2013, he visited Miami and toured possible stadium sites with Claure, also joining him courtside at Miami Heat playoff games.

"When I knew David had an option for a franchise, he came to Miami and was able to see what a great city this is. Since then he is falling in love with the city and he made the decision this is where he wants to put his team," Claure said following a recent news conference.

Claure has been on Sprint's board of directors since January, a month before Beckham announced plans to base his team in Miami.

Since then Beckham's group has encountered difficulty in gaining approval for a site to build a privately funded stadium. Preferences for waterfront locations at Port Miami and adjacent to **AmericanAirlines**

Arena on Biscayne Bay drew considerable opposition and were ultimately rejected by Miami-Dade county and city officials.

Although Claire is Beckham's primary local connection, his move to the Midwest won't impact stadium negotiations here, Schwartz said. Even while heading Brightstar, he was frequently away from South Florida.

"It's a big opportunity for him and his family. But his love for Miami and his roots in Miami are not going to change," Schwartz said. "As far as the business side of getting a stadium deal done, that is not where Marcel has focused his time. Marcelo has got a business to run. They leave the business side to the professionals."

Claire, who founded Miami-based Brightstar in 1997, owns a soccer team in Bolivia. His net worth is in excess of \$900 million, according to Forbes.

Beckham United said in a statement: "We've always known that Marcelo Claire is one of South Florida's brightest minds and we are fortunate to have him on our team as we work to bring professional soccer to Miami. Marcelo's passion for the sport of soccer, coupled with his love for Miami, are two of the reasons why we have identified the city as our top target. Marcelo and David remain committed to bringing South Florida fans what they want and deserve: a world class MLS team."

Beckham's other main investor in the MLS team is Fuller, creator of "American Idol" and former manager of the Spice Girls.

All of their international celebrity has so far failed to trump Miami politics in securing a stadium site. Since the group's first two choices were shot down, there has been some discussion with officials in **Broward County**, but Miami-Dade remains the primary focus.

A week ago, MLS Commissioner Don Garber reiterated that priority in an interview with ESPN, saying, "We remain focused on a downtown Miami location, and we will not expand to Miami unless we have a downtown site for the stadium."

Claire has spoken out against a site adjacent to **Marlins Park** in Little Havana, which some Miami-Dade officials now favor.

Beckham United said in a statement: "I think they're looking at Miami from the standpoint that Miami is becoming more of an urban city," Schwartz said. "It's got to be the right site and it's got to be the right deal. And most importantly, it's got to be accessible and something that is going to be conducive for the fans. That's what they're trying to pull off.

"They're getting a lot of proposals, there are a lot of opportunities out there, and they are doing what they have to do to make the right choice. Hopefully they'll be able to work it out."