Hornets celebrate move to New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — In the end, the vote that cleared the way for the Hornets to leave Charlotte was a Big Easy.

NBA owners voted 28-1 Friday to approve the team's move at the conclusion of this season. Team owners George Shinn and Ray Woolridge, reviled in Charlotte, paraded behind a brass band as they entered a news conference in their new city among a cadre of politicians.

The celebration came a little more than two hours after the NBA announced that representatives of the league's 29 ownership groups had voted to approve the Hornets' move from Charlotte.

The Hornets' 14-year run in Charlotte will end soon. The team is still playing, trailing the New Jersey Nets 2-1 in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference semifinals. They won 115-97 Thursday night at the half-empty Charlotte Coliseum.

After a referendum to finance a new arena was defeated last year, the Hornets' owners said they needed to relocate to avoid millions of dollars in annual losses, in part from drastically declining attendance.

The offer from New Orleans has been described in league circles as extremely generous, and a seven-owner relocation committee recommended approval 10 days earlier.

A giant New Orleans Hornets jersey was unveiled at the news conference, champagne was uncorked and hundreds of purple and teal balloons were released.

Shinn expressed some regrets about leaving North Carolina.

"It's very difficult. I grew up there. I was educated there. My children were raised there," Shinn said. "I still have family and friends there — a lot of people that I cherish the relationship. It's hard to uproot, but we had no choice."

New Orleans has tried to attract an NBA team since the Jazz left for Utah in 1979. After missing out on the Timberwolves in 1994 and the Grizzlies last year, the city and state went all out to land the Hornets.

The return of the National Basketball Association to New Orleans could be fun for fans, but it's unlikely the team will provide much, if any, of an overall economic boost, economists say.

A study by the University of New Orleans says the Hornets probably will add $54 million to the New Orleans metropolitan area during its first season. That calculation does not count money diverted from other forms of spending, said Tim Ryan, a UNO economist.

The Hornets' ownership will no longer be involved in the operation of the WNBA's Charlotte Sting. The Sting will stay in Charlotte under the management of the WNBA.

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