

NFL lockout forces Mankato officials to play the

WAITING GAME

Preparations for 46th Vikings training camp in full gear

By Shane Frederick

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Planning meetings have taken place, and hotel rooms are booked for later this summer.

As far as folks around town are concerned, Minnesota Vikings Training Camp, scheduled to start in three months, is on.

"We are operating as if camp is going to happen," said Anna Thill, president of the Greater Mankato Convention & Visitors Bureau.

A year ago, folks wondered whether quarterback Brett Favre would make it to Mankato (he didn't). This year, they're wondering whether there will be a training camp at all.

After the collective bargaining agreement between players and teams expired in March, the owners locked out the players, putting a halt to almost all football functions until a new contract can be reached.

One of the exceptions to that is the NFL draft, which begins on Thursday night. The Vikings have the 12th overall pick.

After that, it will be back to negotiations, mediations and a players' lawsuit against the league.

If the two sides are still bickering over slices of a multi-billion-dollar pie this summer, the lockout could keep the Vikings from making their 46th consecutive return to their offseason home at Minnesota State University.

"I hope they figure it out," said Preston Lougheed, general manager of the AmericInn Hotel & Conference Center near the MSU campus.

Lougheed said Vikings personnel and others, including media and fans, have reserved meeting areas and blocks of rooms for late July and early August (official training camp dates have not been set yet).

But if camp is called off because of the work stoppage, many of those rooms will sit empty, as will the area's restaurants and bars.

"Right now, it's business as usual," Lougheed said.

Thill echoed that, saying that meetings have been held with the Vikings and that officials from the team and the Mankato community have to prepare as if the dispute will be resolved in time for the annual move into the MSU dorms and two-a-days practices.

"If we don't, we're going to get caught by surprise," Thill said.

Some fans fear that the lockout could last well into the season or even cancel it, even though the NFL schedule was released last week. The Vikings are slated to open the season on Sept. 11 at San Diego.

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Pat Christman

Jared Allen (right) and other Vikings players sign autographs for fans following a training camp practice last summer at Minnesota State University. The current lockout of players by NFL owners threatens the camp coming back for a 46th straight summer.

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Even if the teams do kick off on time, a canceled training camp would cost coach Leslie Frazier and his team two weeks of almost nonstop meetings and practice time.

It could also cost the Mankato area millions of dollars.

According to Thill, the Convention & Visitors Bureau estimates that Mankato expects about 50,000 visitors to town and a \$5 million revenue boost to the local economy during training camp.

"I hear people talking, mostly fans and people around University Square," Lougheed said, "and they want the Vikings to come.

It would be a big hit to the hotel and to Mankato if they don't come."

There have been work stoppages in the past — player strikes in 1982 and 1987 — but those began after training camp had ended.

Thill said last summer's training camp was a huge hit because the Vikings advanced to the NFC Championship Game the previous season. Even though Favre didn't rejoin the team until after it broke camp, the stands were often jam-packed for the daily practices.

Hopes aren't quite so high right now after a disastrous 2010 season, which saw Favre injured, coach Brad Childress fired and replaced by Frazier and the team miss the playoffs with a 6-10 record.

"Hopefully they draft someone that people want to come to Mankato to see," Thill said.

Whether they do or not, having a rebuilding team in town is better than having no team in town.

"We're waiting with the rest of the world," Thill said.

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