

# How the Seahawks were saved from California's clutches

*This Super Bowl caliber team of 2013 almost wasn't here. Back in 1996, the Seahawks hit the road for Southern California. If not for billionaire Paul Allen and a desperate effort to save Seattle's NFL franchise, the Northwest would have been robbed.*

By [Jayson Jenks](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter



*Ken Behring, top left, owned the Seahawks starting in 1988 but sold them to Paul Allen, right, aided by locals including Gary Locke, center, and Bob Whitsitt, bottom right. Illustration by Rich Boudet / The Seattle Times*

Paul Allen felt none of the usual motivations to buy an NFL team.

Although he liked football, he had no burning passion for it. He had no childhood dream to fulfill, no midlife crisis to quench and he already owned a pro sports team, the Portland Trail Blazers. Allen, you could reasonably say, never wanted to own the Seahawks.

Yet in a warehouse by the Ballard Bridge in June 1997, Allen took a seat in an easy chair and delivered a sales pitch to the rest of the state. Allen had agreed to buy the Seahawks from disgruntled owner Ken Behring, but the deal hinged on a make-or-break piece: Allen wouldn't buy the team unless the public voted in favor of a new stadium later that month.

All along, Allen told his campaign [he would appear in one ad](#). The trick was pinpointing the time to unveil him. With two weeks until the stadium vote and attention searing, Allen's campaign pulled the trigger.

A rumor had started that Allen would still purchase the Seahawks from Behring, an out-of-town owner who temporarily moved the team to California in 1996, even without a new stadium. So Allen's campaign sent him to the warehouse with a director and producer waiting.

"When I said yes to help save the Seahawks," Allen began, "I meant that I'd do my part in building something for the future, personally and financially. If you vote yes, I'll do what it takes to make the new stadium and exhibition center a success. I stand by that commitment."

He paused for just a second.

"But if you say no, that means no for me too, because I'm not going to do this without you. When I said that you'll have the final say, I meant it. Together, we can leave something for future generations."

The commercial lasted 30 seconds. Allen didn't come across as threatening or hostile, but there was no mistaking his message.

One of the richest men in the world was asking the public to hold his hand.

**King County councilmember Pete von Reichbauer glances** out large office windows. From where he's seated high above downtown, he can see landmarks checkered across the city, but one stops him every so often.

"I'm looking down at CenturyLink Field right now," he says, "and it's amazing it's even physically there."

What's hard to remember in this, the year of so much hype and hope, is that this season and many before it almost never happened. There

almost was [no Russell Wilson in Seattle](#), [no seismic-inducing run by Marshawn Lynch](#), [no trip to the Super Bowl in 2006](#). The Seahawks today are considered one of the model



*Pete Von Reichbauer remains a King County councilmember. John Lok / Seattle Times, 2006*

franchises in the NFL, the roots of which date to 1996 and 1997. This is a look back at that crucial time in the team's history and the deal-making that kept the Seahawks from moving away.

Von Reichbauer stood in the middle of the storm 17 years ago. When Behring decided he no longer wanted to own the team, he quietly reached out to von Reichbauer. He wanted him to gauge interest in potential buyers. Von Reichbauer looked up and down the Pacific Northwest, from Vancouver, B.C., to Eugene, Ore.

Those who had enough money to buy the team weren't interested. Those who were interested didn't have enough money. The Seahawks, von Reichbauer thought, might actually leave.

"People today have a hard time believing the Seahawks were out of town," he says. "But they were. And quite frankly, there weren't a lot of people standing in front of the bus to stop them."



*Ken Behring bought a Seahawks team that made the playoffs in 1988, but by 1996, his heavy-handed management style had failed and alienated the fan base. Craig Fujii / The Seattle Times, 1988*

**By the end of his reign, Behring started receiving death threats.** The threats caused enough of a scare that Sharon Nelson, Behring's assistant, moved the team's executive offices into her home by Lake Sammamish.

It was a fast and ungraceful fall for Behring, a real-estate developer who purchased the Seahawks in 1988 after they had made the playoffs.

From the beginning, Behring didn't feel welcomed in the community. He bought a home and condo in Seattle but eventually sold both. He didn't reach out to the old ownership group led by the Nordstrom family. Before long, he spent most of his time in his sprawling California home, where he stewed over the bad press he was getting in Seattle (Behring and his son David didn't respond to multiple interview requests for this story).

Some thought Behring bought the team as a key to future real-estate ventures in the Pacific Northwest. When his plans for grand developments were shot down, he recoiled.

"He was not a nice guy," von Reichbauer said. "He used us as a playground."

Under Behring, the Seahawks drafted Dan McGwire instead of Brett Favre, and a few years later picked Rick Mirer because Behring liked his toughness. He once complained in an interview that his only regret in buying the Seahawks was that "I can't (run) the team. That's considered meddling." When asked in another interview which players he had a direct role in bringing to Seattle, he replied, "All of them."

By 1996, Behring's heavy-handed style had failed. Losses mounted. The five-digit waiting list for season tickets had long shriveled up. Free agents Marcus Allen, Mark Ingram, Rod Bernstine and Will Wolford all spurned the Seahawks.

Behring said he felt ostracized and hated the way the Seattle media portrayed him. Worse, he didn't think the Kingdome was suitable and wanted massive upgrades or a new stadium.

When the Legislature paved the way for the Mariners to get a new stadium in 1995 but left the Seahawks in the cold, Behring was furious.

**Around a coffee table at the Woodmark Hotel in Kirkland** early in 1996, Behring and his attorney Ron Olson laid out the dangers of the Kingdome.

Tiles had fallen inside the stadium in 1994 and the roof leaked. The 20-year-old Kingdome, Olson argued amid [rumors that Behring was planning a move to Southern California](#), was not only outdated but unsafe because of earthquakes.



*Ken Behring didn't think the Kingdome was suitable and wanted massive upgrades or a new stadium. Tom Reese / The Seattle Times, 1989*

“We found their attitude and position so ridiculous,” said Gary Locke, then the King County executive who attended the meeting. “It was very clear to us that what they were proposing was so unrealistic and such a non-starter that we really felt they were about to leave.”

As two participants at the meeting remember it, Behring didn’t say a word as Olson explained the problem to Locke and the rest of the King County contingent. Then, at the end of the meeting, Behring finally spoke.

“And if we could make any money,” he said, “we’d still be here.”

On Feb. 2, 1996, Behring made those intentions official: He would load up the team’s equipment in vans and move the Seahawks to California.

A Los Angeles Times reporter caught the city’s mixed feelings on a late afternoon ferry ride from downtown Seattle.

“I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” a voice said over the ferry loudspeaker. “The bad news is that the Seahawks are probably leaving town.”

The ferry fell silent.

“The good news is that Ken Behring is leaving town.”

The commuters erupted in cheers.

Anaheim city officials announced their desire to build a new stadium for the Seahawks, although they were careful not to call the team by name. Los Angeles city officials also expressed interest. At Rams Park, the practice facility for the Rams before they left town, city workers cut grass and prepared the facility for immediate use.

Behring’s decision to move the team came at a time of instability for the NFL. In the early 1980s, the league fought to keep the Raiders from moving to Los Angeles but lost an expensive court battle.

Owners started realizing the advantage of new stadiums with luxury suites and club levels. The stadiums of old looked more and more like lost money. In a two-year window around Behring’s move, Houston lost the Oilers, Cleveland lost the Browns and Los Angeles lost the Rams and Raiders.

All the while Behring kept saying the Seahawks weren’t for sale. But those involved in early negotiations realized something that made them think differently.

He kept talking to them.

**In late February or early March 1996**, von Reichbauer arranged a meeting with Allen’s inner circle.



Bob Whitsitt, the general manager of the Portland Trail Blazers, Allen Israel, Allen's attorney, and Bert Kolde, one of Allen's closest friends, joined von Reichbauer in a private room at the Rainier Club to flirt with the idea of Allen buying the team.

Behring wanted a buyer who could literally write a check on the spot, who didn't need minority owners or approval from banks. Allen was one of the few people capable of that.

Von Reichbauer, acting as a broker for Behring, knew he needed to convince Allen that he wouldn't be used as leverage against Los Angeles or Anaheim. He needed to convince him that Behring was sincere in selling.

Shortly after the Rainier Club meeting, Locke met with Allen in Israel's downtown office. He wanted to ask Allen in person the question floating around: Would he save the Seahawks?

"He didn't try to sell it to Paul as some great economic opportunity," Israel said. "He tried to sell it to Paul as being an act of civic responsibility. And I think Paul understood it that way."

The other assumption Allen and his team were working under: There were no other buyers if he said no. (An attempt to reach Allen through a spokeswoman was unsuccessful.)

In the meantime, the NFL threatened to fine Behring \$500,000 and another \$50,000 for every week the Seahawks practiced in Anaheim. Hours before Orange County's "Welcome Ken Behring Party" in late March, he announced the Seahawks were heading back to Seattle.

But if Seattle voted against upgrading the Kingdome or building a new stadium, the NFL would be far less likely to thwart Behring from relocating.

**Those initial meetings pushed Allen closer to buying the team,** but he waded in cautiously.

"Paul expressed enough interest that if we could do A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I and maybe J, K, L and M," Whitsitt said, "he would consider buying the team."

On Easter Sunday in April 1996, Whitsitt and Allen spent a good chunk of the day on the phone. Allen wasn't optimistic. He feared the politicians were going to saddle the rich guy with the bill, despite what they were saying. Allen was leaving the country soon. The deal appeared stuck in mud.

"We didn't have an environment that seemed to be working," Whitsitt said.

That's when Whitsitt threw out an idea. If Whitsitt could get Behring to agree to an option that would allow Allen to buy the team only if the public voted to help finance the new stadium, would he be interested?

Allen was skeptical, but he gave Whitsitt marching orders: See if you can reach a deal.

**Once the deal for the option was signed April 20, 1996**, Allen and the voters had 14 months [to come up with a plan or he'd walk](#). That triggered a list of complications, each of which had to be maneuvered differently.

"You're creating a big iceberg and trying to move it," Whitsitt said. "And each piece of the iceberg someone is trying to blow up."

For starters, Allen wanted an open-air stadium. That meant the Kingdome had to be imploded, which meant all the auto and home-and-boat show people needed a new place to operate. That's how the exhibition hall became part of the deal.

The \$430 million project — a new stadium, exhibition center and parking garage — was the only issue on the ballot, so Allen paid \$4.2 million for the election, which was done largely by mail. Originally, the vote was going to include just King County, [but it became a statewide vote](#).

"Our research told us that in Eastern Washington and southwest Washington, it wasn't that people didn't like the Seahawks," said Bob Gogerty, who helped run Allen's campaign. "And it wasn't that they didn't like Paul. They just didn't like Seattle."

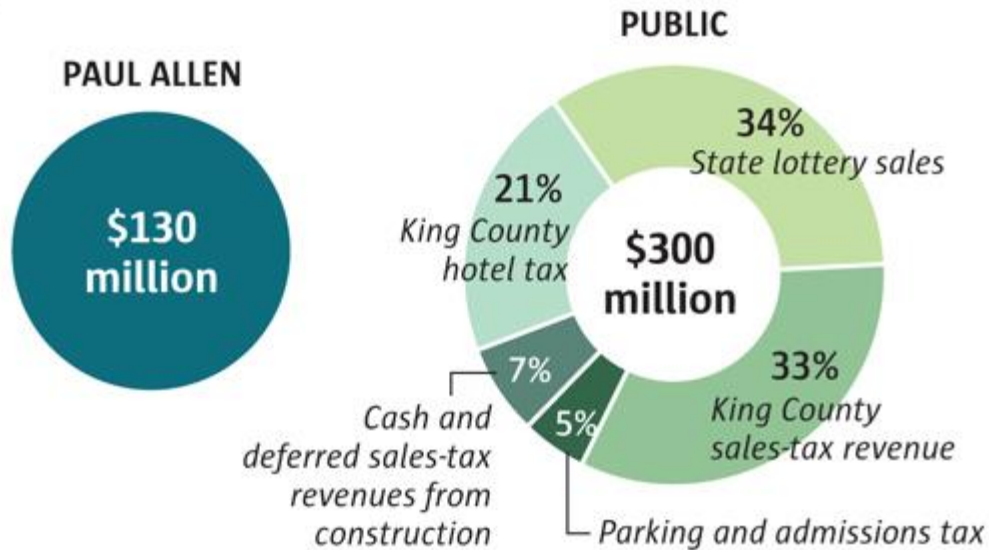
Plus, many were still fuming over the vote for the Mariners' new stadium in 1995. The public had voted against funding a new stadium, but the Legislature passed the measure anyway.

There were important breakthroughs that eased the gridlock. Allen's team advocated early on for advertising the stadium as a future home for a soccer team. Wally Toner, a political consultant, saw the rising popularity of soccer in the area and thought it could be the tipping point.

"You could feel it, but he really felt it," Gogerty said. "And that turned out to be a big deal."

## How stadium was paid for

The funding for the \$430 million project to build a new Seahawks stadium, exhibition center and parking garage came from two places. Paul Allen contributed \$130 million and the public paid the other \$300 million. Here is the breakdown of the public's share:



Source: Washington State Public Stadium Authority

KELLY SHEA / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**As the inner workings were unfolding, the Seahawks** still had important football decisions to make. Those decisions were muddled by the fact that although Allen had an option to buy the team, Behring still technically owned it.

The 1997 offseason was one of the most pivotal in franchise history, not so much for results but for its message.

At the Pro Bowl that year, Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker Chad Brown looked around the locker room for someone to trade helmets with, an annual tradition.

Out of nowhere, Seahawks defensive lineman Cortez Kennedy approached Brown, helmet in hand, and asked him to swap.



Chad Brown was a key free-agent acquisition for the Seahawks. Rod Mar / The Seattle Times, 1999



Brown didn't say no, but he couldn't have been more bummed.

"Not that I didn't think Cortez was a good player," Brown said. "But the helmet design wasn't very cool, they weren't a winning team, and I remember telling my wife afterward, 'Man, I got a *Seahawks* helmet. Can you believe that?'"

Brown laughed.

"Less than three weeks later," he said, "[I signed with the Seahawks](#) and had a whole new appreciation for how they could be."

Brown, whom Sports Illustrated called the best free agent on the market that year, didn't initially consider the Seahawks. But at 12:01 a.m., when Brown became a free agent, the Seahawks had Allen's private plane waiting to pick him up in Denver. Once in Seattle, he stayed in a suite with a kitchen and multiple rooms.

Brown signed with the Seahawks for \$24 million.

"Chad was a very good player for us," Whitsitt said, "but we also had to start establishing that we were real, that we know what we're doing and we're going in the right direction."

At the draft later that year, the Seahawks had the chance to maneuver to make two of the first six picks via trades. But Behring didn't want to pay the extra money the picks were going to cost.

On a conference call with Whitsitt, Kolde, Gogerty and Bud Coffey, Allen asked, "What are the chances we're going to get out of the Legislature and actually get something done?"

The responses were chilly. The new stadium appeared a longshot. Allen didn't flinch. He decided to make the moves anyway and, according to Sports Illustrated, agreed to spend \$25 million even if he didn't buy the team.

On the day of the draft, Whitsitt signed a document on Allen's behalf guaranteeing that he would cover the costs. The Seahawks [then picked cornerback Shawn Springs and offensive tackle Walter Jones](#), two centerpieces for years to come.

"Paul wanted to have the best team possible if he did buy it," Whitsitt said. "Why blow that opportunity? And it also showed the fans who were getting ready to vote in a few months that Paul was going to be a terrific owner. He didn't even own it yet and look what he's doing."

**On the day of the public vote in June 1997**, Allen and his campaign held a watch party.

The early results were discouraging. Ballots from Eastern and southwest Washington arrived early by mail and put the new stadium in a hole.

Earlier that day, Allen called von Reichbauer, the King County councilmember who brokered the initial conversation. He wanted to thank him for what he'd done, regardless of what happened.

"You're thanking me?" von Reichbauer said. "You put your name on the line. It's not just the check. Everyone just looks at the check, but at the end of the day you value your privacy and I'll be forever grateful to you as a fan."

As the night rolled on, votes from the Seattle area started tipping the scales in Allen's favor. When it was all over, the measure for a new stadium and exhibition hall narrowly passed [with 51 percent of the vote](#). The taxpayers would contribute \$300 million, Allen the remaining \$130 million.



*Paul Allen had reason to rock out once the stadium referendum appeared to pass in June 1997. "You put your name on the line," King County Councilmember Pete von Reichbauer told Allen. Tom Reese / Seattle Times, 1997*

The Seahawks were staying in Seattle.

All these years later, there's a feeling from many involved that the deal couldn't be replicated today. Too many wrinkles had to be ironed, too many people had to compromise.

At the center of the chaos, behind the scenes of it all, was Allen, a man with little interest in owning a football team but a strong interest in his hometown.

"I'm not sure anybody else in this community would have done what he did," said Herman Sarkowsky, the former Seahawks minority owner. "That was the birth of the stadium, and the birth of the stadium was the lifeline for the club we know today."

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## **Where are they now?**

### **Paul Allen**

Allen is one of the NFL's most private owners, although he did recently post a picture on Twitter of him talking to actor Will Ferrell and rapper Macklemore on the sideline before a Seahawks game. He was featured in the November issue of *Wired* for his research to reverse-engineer the human brain. *Forbes* ranked him the 26th richest American in September.

## **Ken Behring**

After Behring sold the Seahawks, he turned his attention to philanthropy. He has donated \$100 million to the Smithsonian since 1997. He also founded the Wheelchair Foundation, which delivers wheelchairs to countries in need, and the Global Health and Education Foundation. He recently released his revised memoir, “Road to Leadership: Finding a Life of Purpose” and still lives in Blackhawk, his upscale real-estate development in California, with his wife.

## **Bob Whitsitt**

Whitsitt became president of football operations for the Seahawks, a position he held until Allen fired him in 2005. Today, Whitsitt is a business consultant and offers a wide range of services under the umbrella of Whitsitt Enterprises, from negotiations to strategic business development to public speaking.

## **Gary Locke**

One of the most public politicians throughout the deal, Locke became Washington’s governor in 1997 and served two terms. He was nominated by President Obama in 2009 to serve as Secretary of Commerce. In 2011, Locke was named U.S. ambassador to China, a position he still holds.

## **Pete von Reichbauer**

After brokering the initial conversations to get Allen involved, von Reichbauer has remained a King County councilmember. He is up for re-election in November and is running unopposed.

## **Chad Brown**

One of Seattle’s biggest free-agent signings in the early years of Allen’s ownership, Brown played for the Seahawks for eight seasons and made two Pro Bowls. Brown owned a reptile business in Colorado until a fire burned down his warehouse and killed thousands of snakes in 2011.

## **Bert Kolde**

Allen’s old college roommate handled much of the legislative side of the deal for the new stadium. He is considered Allen’s right-hand man and is the vice chairman of the Seahawks board of directors. He can be seen at training camp and games.

*Jayson Jenks*

### **Then and now**

Under owner Paul Allen, the Seahawks have made eight playoff appearances and have won 52 percent of their games overall. Under former owner Ken Behring, the franchise made one playoff appearance and won 42 percent of the time.

<b>Category</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2013</b>
Value of franchise	\$200 million	\$1.081 billion*
Season tickets sold	37,000	62,000
Stadium	Kingdome	CenturyLink Field
Capacity	66,000	67,000
Club seats	none	7,000
Suites	46	82
Restrooms	41	63
Elevators	3	12

\*according to Forbes in August 2013