# MLB expansion? These cities in U.S. and abroad make sense

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It won't happen anytime soon, but expansion to 32 teams is in Major League Baseball's not-too-distant future, according to commissioner Rob Manfred. At a meeting with the Associated Press Sports Editors in New York on Thursday, Manfred acknowledged that such a move makes sense both for the league's long-term growth strategy and to the nuts and bolts of scheduling. Based on Manfred's statements on Thursday and in the recent past, it's not out of the question that at least one of the new teams could be from outside the United States.

Before MLB can expand, however, the commissioner said that the ongoing stadium sagas in Tampa Bay and Oakland need to be resolved. While every other team has either moved into a new venue or substantially upgraded its current one since 1989, when Toronto opened what is now called the Rogers Centre, both the Rays and the A's have run into an series of legal and logistical battles in recent years while attempting to secure a new stadium. Relocation to what would otherwise be a target city for a brand new team looms as an option if either can't work out a new stadium deal.

"Baseball’s a growth sport, a growth business, [and] sooner or later growth businesses expand," said Manfred. "I do see expansion as a longer-term proposition."

MLB last expanded in 1998, when the Devil Rays and Diamondbacks began play. That was the majors' fifth round of expansion since the early 1960s. The first added the Los Angeles Angels and the second edition of the Washington Senators (their predecessors had moved to Minnesota to become the Twins) to the AL in 1961, with the New York Mets and Houston Colt .45s joining the NL in '62. The second wave, in '69, added the Kansas City Royals and Seattle Pilots (who the next year moved to Milwaukee and became the Brewers) to the AL, and the Montreal Expos and San Diego Padres to the NL, with the leagues splitting into two six-team divisions apiece. The third, in '77, added the Seattle Mariners and Toronto Blue Jays to the AL, creating seven-team divisions in the Junior Circuit, and the fourth, in '93, added the Colorado Rockies and Florida Marlins to the NL. After one year of seven-team divisions in the Senior Circuit, the leagues realigned into the three-division format still in use today, though not until 2013, when the Astros switched from the NL Central to the AL West, were the divisions of uniform size.

The current format, with six five-team divisions and 15-team leagues, creates headaches in that at least one interleague series is always necessary, and at least one team is always playing outside its own division—two factors that can dampen excitement during the final weeks of the season. The addition of two more teams would eliminate that problem, creating eight four-team divisions. "Fours [multiples of four] work better than fives from a scheduling perspective—significantly better," said Manfred. "So that obviously would be a helpful change in that regard if we were to expand."

Manfred didn't address whether there's enough talent to fill out two more rosters—a common complaint heard every time the league expands—but it's worth considering some basic math. The U.S. population has grown by nearly 17% since 1998, based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates (from 275.9 million to 322.7 million). Even if rates of participation in the sport are [declining within this country](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-07-14/a-million-kids-stopped-playing-baseball-mlb-wants-to-win-them-back), the overall growth of the potential player pool around the world, especially in Latin America and Asia, has likely been enough to withstand increasing the size of MLB roster's by 6.7%.

As to where MLB might go next, Manfred hinted strongly at international growth, saying "If we were to expand, I do think a city that makes sense geographically—meaning in terms of realistic travel distances—and is outside of the 48 contiguous states would be a positive choice for us in terms of growing the game."

Given that, what follows here is a quick rundown of six cities that might be targets, ranked in order of [metropolitan populations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Metropolitan_Statistical_Areas) as derived from 2015 census estimates for U.S. cities, and by published reports for [Canada](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo05a-eng.htm) and [Mexico](http://www.citypopulation.de/php/mexico-metro.php).

**MEXICO CITY**

**Population: 20.89 million (first in Mexico)**

Manfred has made no secret of his desire to make further inroads into Mexico, a country of roughly 120 million people. Last fall, he [told Forbes' Maury Brown](http://www.forbes.com/sites/maurybrown/2015/10/01/mlb-commissioner-rob-manfred-touts-mexico-as-a-possible-expansion-location/#6cd628112840), "We see Mexico as an opportunity internationally. We also think a team in Mexico and a larger number of Mexican players in the big leagues could really help us continue to grow the Hispanic market in the United States.” Last month, the Astros and Padres played a pair of exhibitions in Mexico City, North America's largest city—the first time since 2004 that the league had ventured there. They were high-scoring affairs, decided by Coors Field-like scores of 11–1 and 21–6, which makes sense given that the city's elevation is 7,350 feet above sea level. This could be a new challenge for pitchers.

Expanding into Mexico City presents some issues beyond the altitude and [ongoing air-quality crisis](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/30/mexico-city-air-pollution-orders-cars-off-road-one-day-a-week). Governmental [corruption](http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/15/americas/mexico-corruption-el-chapo-escape/) and a [high crime rate](http://www.numbeo.com/crime/city_result.jsp?country=Mexico&city=Mexico+City) create political and security concerns no matter where MLB might land in Mexico. (Monterrey, with a metropolitan population of 4.48 million and a [history of hosting](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2016/jan/13/padres-astros-spring-training-games-mexico-city/) MLB regular season forays thanks to a stadium that seats 27,000, is another option.) But the biggest issue may be the financial status of its residents. [According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development](http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/mexico/), the average household net-adjusted disposable income per capita for the country is $13,085 a year, less than one-third that of [the U.S. average](http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/united-states/) of $41,355. Even with a population even bigger than New York City's, the question of whether Mexico City can produce enough fans who can afford to attend games regularly looms large.

Michael Ivins/Boston Red Sox/Getty Images

​**MONTREAL**

**Population: 4.06 million (second in Canada, 21st in North America)**

Baseball has a rich history in Montreal dating back to the 19th century. From 1897 to 1917 and then '28 to '60, the Montreal Royals were members of the International League, serving as the Dodgers' top farm club during the last 22 of those years. In 1946, Jackie Robinson played for the Royals, becoming the first African-American player for a major league affiliate; he won league MVP honors that season and helped the Royals win the league championship.

The Expos debuted in Montreal in 1969, playing first in makeshift Jarry Park and then at Olympic Stadium, a domed monstrosity built for the 1976 Summer Olympics. The team produced Hall of Famers Gary Carter, Andre Dawson and Pedro Martinez, as well as the Hall-caliber players like outfielders Vladimir Guerrero, Tim Raines and Larry Walker, but all of those players eventually departed for more lucrative pastures. The 1994–95 players' strike hit just as the Expos owned the best record in baseball and were closing in on just their second postseason berth in franchise history. In the wake of that work stoppage, Montreal was forced to dismantle its talented core, and the franchise never recovered. Declining attendance, underfunded ownership and a failure to secure a new ballpark all doomed the franchise. After being threatened with contraction in 2001, the Expos became wards of MLB from '02 through the end of their time in Canada, which came after the '04 season, when they skipped town for Washington, D.C., and became the Nationals.

A movement to bring MLB back to Montreal has been in the works for awhile thanks to the efforts of former Expos outfielder Warren Cromartie and his [Montreal Baseball Project](http://montrealbaseballproject.com/en/about/). In each of the past three years, Olympic Stadium has played host to two-game exhibition series involving the Blue Jays and various opponents, with many former Expos, including Martinez and Raines, showing up for the festivities; paid attendance at those games averaged more than 48,000 per night. The biggest issue facing expansion here—just as it was when it came to trying to retain the Expos—is securing the funding to build a replacement for Olympic Stadium, which needs [more than $200 million](http://www.cjad.com/cjad-news-human-interest/2016/04/15/the-big-owe-to-cost-taxpayers-213-million?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook) worth of repairs. Beyond that matter, while Manfred stopped short of calling Montreal MLB's top target for expansion, he did say, "I think, even if I didn’t want to say this, the mayor of Montreal would probably tell you if you walked past him on the street, that I have met with him on a number of occasions. They have expressed a strong desire to have Major League Baseball back in Montreal."

**VANCOUVER**

**Population: 2.5 million (third in Canada, 35th in North America)**

Montreal isn't Canada's only alternative for expansion. Vancouver ranks as the most livable city in North America, according to Mercer's Quality of Living Rankings. Its well-regarded multipurpose stadium, BC Place—the current home of Vancouver’s entries in the Canadian Football League and Major League Soccer—has played host to Triple A and spring training games in the past, though a 2011 renovation that included a cable-supported retractable roof also added a central scoreboard whose [placement](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/BC_Place_2011_Whitecaps.jpg) generates [concerns](http://www.vancourier.com/baseball-in-b-c-place-a-thing-of-the-past-1.375100) with regards to future baseball compatibility. Another strike against this city may be its short-lived history in the National Basketball Association. The Vancouver Grizzlies lasted just six seasons, from 1995–96 to 2000–01, before relocating to Memphis, with [bad luck in the draft](http://www.vancourier.com/baseball-in-b-c-place-a-thing-of-the-past-1.375100) and poor attendance contributing their demise; the league's '98 lockout, like the strike for the Expos, was the crippling blow.

Another snag for putting a team here is the proximity of the Mariners, who are roughly 140 miles away in Seattle and have [asserted their territorial rights here](http://m.mlb.com/news/article/66946688/portland-ore-ready-and-willing-to-become-a-major-league-city); they would likely require some major concessions to allow a neighbor. Having another team in this area could benefit the Mariners, however, in that they’re currently isolated enough relative to the rest of the majors that they will log the [most air miles](http://baseballsavant.com/apps/map.php?team=sea&season=2016) of any team in 2016, at 47,704. A regional rivalry could lessen the blow to both the Mariners and the new club, since some of their games against more far-flung opponents would be replaced by those against their new rivals.

**CHARLOTTE, N.C.**

**Population: 2.43 million (22nd in United States)**

With a population of just over 10 million, North Carolina ranks ninth among the 50 states and is the largest without a team in MLB. A major league team in the state could pull in fans for whom the Nationals (roughly 400 miles away) or Braves (250 miles away) are the closest teams. The Triple A Charlotte Knights, meanwhile, have led the minors in attendance in each of the past two years via their brand-new 10,200-seat BB&T BallPark.

That said, while the NFL’s Carolina Panthers have done well in attendance (the team has finished eighth in each of the last three years), the NBA’s Charlotte Hornets have not been a powerhouse in terms of putting fans in the seats. The Hornets—actually the second franchise with that name, the first having moved to New Orleans in 2002—have been mired in the lower half of NBA attendance for several years. The NBA currently has North Carolina under a microscope, with commissioner Adam Silver [threatening to move the 2017 All-Star Game](http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/business/article73086142.html) out of Charlotte unless the controversial House Bill 2—a law targeted at preventing transgender people from using restrooms based on their gender identity—is changed. That issue is likely to be settled by the time MLB weighs Charlotte for suitability, however.

**PORTLAND, ORE.**

**Population: 2.39 million (23rd in United States)**

Just 172 miles south of Seattle is another Pacific Northwest alternative: Portland. Like Vancouver, Portland does well in quality-of-life surveys and already has a team in a "big four" sport with the NBA's Trail Blazers. In fact, Portland—a few rungs below Denver (2.81 million, 19th in the U.S.) and Pittsburgh (2.35 million, 26th) in population size—is the largest in the U.S. with only one team in either of MLB, the NBA, the NFL or the NHL, though both the Blazers and Major Legue Soccer's Timbers have done well, attendance-wise, for years.

As for its baseball history, Portland was long a staple of the Pacific Coast League, but it also had intermittent interruptions, during one of which the city played host to the independent Portland Mavericks, the subject of an entertaining 2014 documentary, [*The Battered Bastards of Baseball*](http://www.oregonlive.com/movies/2014/07/battered_bastards_of_baseball_1.html). The city has been without baseball since the end of the 2010 season, and as with Vancouver, it will take pacifying the Mariners to bring it back at the major league level.

**AUSTIN, TEXAS**

**Population: 2.0 million (33rd in United States)**

While nearby San Antonio (2.38 million, 25th) has the higher population and is regarded as a potential destination for expansion in its own right, Fox Sports' JP Morosi [has suggested](http://www.foxsports.com/mlb/story/which-locations-make-the-most-sense-for-mlb-expansion-022816) that Austin may surpass it in desirability, noting that it has a faster-growing population and a higher per capita income than its neighbor an hour away. Wrote Morosi back in February:

Austin is a haven for tech firms and startups—and, consequently, the millennials whom MLB wants to capture through its marketing efforts. Austin is the only top-50 metropolitan area in the U.S. with double-digit population growth since the 2010 census, according to the Austin Chamber of Commerce, with one estimate projecting 2.6 million people will live in the metro area by 2025.

Austin doesn't have a big four team but does support University of Texas Longhorns, whose sports teams are so popular they have their own television network. If it got an MLB franchise, the Astros' jump from the NL to the AL in 2013 means one has to figure that an Austin team would be bound for the National League, where it wouldn't have the luxury of the intrastate, intradivisional rivalry that those two teams enjoy. And who knows what kind of arm-wrestling might transpire when it comes to Nolan Ryan. The Triple A Round Rock Express are part of the greater Austin area; the franchise is co-owned by the Hall of Fame pitcher (who has ties as a player and executive to both of the state's MLB teams) and his son, Reid, and it is currently affiliated with the Rangers even while the senior Ryan now serves as an advisor for the Astros.

**OTHERS**

This list is by no means comprehensive. Other cities often mentioned in such discussions include Las Vegas (2.11 million, 29th in the U.S.), Columbus, Ohio (2.02 million, 32nd), Nashville (1.83 million, 36th in U.S.) and New Orleans (1.23 million, 46th in the U.S.), as well as the aforementioned San Antonio and Monterrey options. Las Vegas currently has no big four teams, but while a major league team could become a big draw in the entertainment-minded city, the state’s legal gambling industry could pose a security risk for MLB. Columbus has NHL and MLS teams and also plays host to Ohio State University. Nashville has NHL and NFL teams as well as Vanderbilt University. New Orleans has NFL and NBA teams. Havana (2.14 million) is fun to think about given its rich baseball history, but the political and economic obstacles are so great that it will be decades before it could even possibly become an option.

Every city has pros and cons that MLB will have to weigh, but the league’s choice will also have to consider the strength of the various prospective ownership groups that might emerge from those locales. It will be years before any of this comes to pass, but with Manfred’s words, expansion is finally on the radar again.