By CHRIS DUNCAN

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HOUSTON — Former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker sat with Houston Texans' owner Bob McNair at the team's playoff victory over Cincinnati in January. McNair asked Baker to spearhead the city's bid for the 2017 Super Bowl and Baker gladly accepted.

On Monday, McNair introduced Baker as the honorary chairman of Houston's bid committee, a prominent figure McNair says can influence owners on his reputation alone.

The owners are expected to vote in May on host sites for the 2016 and 2017 Super Bowls. Miami and San Francisco are competing for the 2016 game, the 50th Super Bowl, and the runner-up will compete against Houston for the 2017 game.

"He's one of the few people who could make a difference," McNair said at a news conference. "In most cases, it would not make a difference. In his case, he's such a respected figure that it'll register with the owners."

Baker, 82, served as the secretary of state under President George H.W. Bush from January 1989 until August 1992. He previously served as Treasury Secretary under Ronald Reagan (1985-88) and as White House Chief of Staff for Reagan (1981-85) and Bush. A Houston native, Baker says his primary role is "lobbying" other NFL owners on behalf of his hometown.

"Hopefully, they will be able to think well for what I've done for this country," Baker said. "I would expect to be able to sit down and talk to them and try to convince them that Houston is indeed the best venue for the 51st Super Bowl. That's my job."

Houston businessman Ric Campo will serve as the committee's chairman. Campo, involved in real-estate investment, currently serves as the chairman of Houston First, a local government corporation aimed at spurring economic growth through conventions and the arts.

Reliant Stadium, home of the Texans, was the site of the 2004 Super Bowl, with Tom Brady and New England defeating Carolina. McNair and Campo said the city will make a more enticing pitch this time, with a 1,000-room hotel scheduled to open downtown in 2016 and an east-west light-rail line downtown expected to be running by April 2014.

The stadium itself will have the largest scoreboards in any venue in the world — 52 feet high by 277 feet long — installed and operating by the start of the 2013 season.

Reliant Stadium, which has a retractable roof, hosted the 2011 Final Four and is scheduled to stage college basketball's premier event again in 2016. The venue is a frequent site for international soccer matches and annually hosts the Meineke Car Care Bowl of Texas in late December.

"We have a lot to be proud of in Houston," Campo added. "The assets that we have will compete very, very well with the other cities for the Super Bowl."

But a key sticking point in the whole process is the fate of the Astrodome, which sits unused and rotting next door to Reliant Stadium. The stadium nicknamed the "Eighth Wonder of the World" when it opened in the 1960s was condemned in July 2008, after the fire marshal's office cited it for nine code violations.

Last May, a consulting firm presented the Harris County commissioners with several options for the Astrodome's future and recommended a $270 million plan to turn it into a multi-purpose facility. The consultants added the commissioners should consider a $385 million plan to make improvements to Reliant Park, including a new 10,000-seat arena, exhibition space and a 2,500-3,000-seat parking garage. Reliant Stadium and the Astrodome are part of the park, a 350-acre parcel south of downtown Houston. Willie Loston, executive director of the county's sports and convention corporation, said Monday the commissioner's court is still mulling the

options. It's not officially scheduled to come before the commissioners until the next capital improvements meeting in June but McNair would like to see something decided much sooner.

"It would be helpful," McNair continued. "It would make our bid more attractive, I don't think there's any question about that."

The consultants reported demolishing the dome comes with the cheapest cost, about $64 million. McNair stopped short of saying he wants that done and noted whatever is decided for the future of the Astrodome, it won't make or break the city's chances of luring the Super Bowl.

"You never know what might be the difference in your bid," McNair added. "We should just do everything we can to make our bid as attractive as possible and that includes making Reliant Park as attractive as possible.

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