

## Energy hope to woo fans back

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The Edmonton Energy introduced their new general manager Rick Stanley during a news conference at Hudson Tap House in Edmonton Friday. (Perry Mah, Edmonton Sun)

They're back. But will their fans be?

The Edmonton Energy will compete in the International Basketball League once again this year despite having their local ownership group pull the plug prior to playoffs last season due to financial restrictions.

"Early on we had not budgeted that trip because it was \$15,000, approximately," franchise spokesman David Dorward said of the single-elimination tournament held in Portland, Oregon. "We had paid that money the year before, 2009, and unfortunately played one game (following a bye through Round 1) and then went home.

"Our mandate was if we didn't raise enough money by gate receipts and sponsorship, that if the owners had to kick in the money, we thought that we would put the money into the 2011 season. So we held back that money that we otherwise would have spent."

As smart a business decision as it might have been to ensure professional basketball would remain in Edmonton in 2011, in the sports world there is nothing worse than a quitter. It begs the question: what makes them think there will be any more support this year, after the team has given it's small — but previously loyal — following nothing to show for it last season?

"I've tried hard to address the concerns of the fans," Dorward said. "I've reached out to them, I've gone to them, I've met with them. The fans understand our side of it, we're not millionaires, we're not deep-pocketed owners, we're community folks."

The Energy used what otherwise would have been their playoff travel fund to pay off league dues this season and ensure one team.

"That was a decision we made in the boardroom and we stand by it," said Dorward.

Steps have been taken to ensure the same situation won't happen again this year.

"We will be down there," said Dorward, whose club will play its final regular-season game on the road in Portland on June 29 before playoffs begin July 1. "So we'll actually be down there if you check the schedule the day before the tournament starts. So it's no longer a trip that's going to cost us a lot of money."

Whether the decision cost them fan support will only be answered at their home-opener, a three-game series against the Bellingham Slam at the U of A Main Gym beginning May 20.

When the Energy begin their season one week prior in Albany, N.Y., they will do it without the services of long-time head coach Paul Sir, who tossed in the towel on the team after the owners did the same last year, despite helping found the franchise in 2007 when they were known as the Edmonton Chill.

"I am (disappointed), I guess I'd have to say," Dorward said. "Paul is a close friend of mine and still is and still will be involved in Basketball Alberta as executive director."

The Energy announced Rick Stanley as their new general manager, who will look to build on the Energy's past by bringing in the top talent from inside and out of Edmonton to contend for the championship.

But the real battle is in the stands, where the Energy need to fill more seats.

"It's a combination of the fans and the sponsors," Dorward said. "We have a really low budget, it's not an expensive league to run, but when the fans are maybe in the 300-500 range that's not quite break even.

"We need to be around 700-800 to really break even."

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