

www.mcall.com/news/breaking/mc-allentown-hockey-arena-announcemen20110302,0,6769838.story

mcall.com

ARENA PLAN UNVEILED

Home for the Phantoms, as well as a community events center and third attraction, could bring Allentown back from brink, Pawlowski says.

March 3, 2011

The minor league hockey arena touted as the cure to Allentown's economic ills will be joined by a community events center and a third anchor attraction, forming an entertainment complex officials say will be worthy of a city eager to go back on the offensive.

The aggressive plan for a new Allentown Entertainment District, unveiled Wednesday by Mayor Ed Pawlowski, could attract hundreds of thousands of visitors to downtown each year and potentially return the city to the top of the Lehigh Valley's urban totem pole.

"It's not just an arena," Pawlowski said during a presentation at The Morning Call, one of several stops he made promoting the project. "We're looking at a lot more than just building a building that will house hockey. We're looking for a complex that will actually help redefine Allentown."

Development of the venue will be shepherded by the Hammes Co. of Brookfield, Wis., which has overseen work on major sports complexes across the country, including the \$1.6 billion New Meadowlands Stadium, home of the New York Giants and New York Jets.

The Allentown arena would have 8,500 permanent seats, with a capacity of 10,000 for concerts.

"You have a chance to do something here that will truly transform this community not just for today's generation but really for generations to come," said Hammes President Robert Dunn. "I'm not sure what a community could do today that will have more of an impact in the long term."

By signing Hammes to a 100-day memorandum of understanding, city officials give the project some major cachet. The firm's portfolio includes the \$430 million home of the Detroit Lions, built in 2002, and a \$295 million renovation of Lambeau Field, the home of the Green Bay Packers, in 2003.

Closer to home, Hammes oversaw development of the Mohegan Sun Arena at Casey Plaza in Wilkes-Barre, in which the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins of the American Hockey League and the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton

advertisement



Pioneers of the Arena Football League play.

Although the project, which will be largely publicly financed, was originally estimated to cost \$80 million, Dunn said it could range from \$70 million to \$100 million.

Hammes will be paid during the initial period "a few hundred thousand dollars" by the Brooks Group of Pittsburgh, owner of the minor league Phantoms, and the Allentown Economic Development Corp., which is partnering with the city to bring the project to fruition, Pawlowski said.

"We wanted a world-class developer," he said.

With Hammes' leadership comes an arena plan unlike many existing venues that were built as stand-alone structures with bowl seating around a sheet of ice. Dunn envisions an integrated complex that could possibly include retail, restaurants, a hotel and exhibition space.

As it stands, Allentown has no space to host conventions and other major events, Pawlowski said, hardly a characteristic befitting Pennsylvania's third-largest city.

The single-purpose arena model would host between 120 and 140 events per year, Dunn said. But by making the complex a year-round attraction, as Hammes has done with Lambeau Field by adding a banquet hall, the venue could play a much larger role in the community.

"If we do it right, we should be able to bring 3-, 4-, 500 events per year to the building," he said.

Though officials have not yet confirmed a site, they are considering locations in center city along Hamilton Street -- mainly the former Corporate Plaza property on N. Seventh Street -- while keeping open the possibility of revisiting the Lehigh River waterfront if necessary.

Pawlowski said Allentown wants to avoid the disconnected nature of the sports stadiums in south Philadelphia, not easily accessible by foot from other business, retail and restaurant districts. He also wants to avoid a single-purpose "destination" stadium like Coca-Cola Park, home of the Lehigh Valley IronPigs.

Putting it next to Coca-Cola Park would be "a mistake with far-reaching implications," he said.

By building in center city, there is no need to re-create a mixed-use neighborhood, Pawlowski said, and the arena could more effectively stimulate economic growth in surrounding areas. But compared with the waterfront, there is not as much available land.

Pawlowski originally planned the arena as part of a larger waterfront development as a way to attract more state investment. But that appears to have changed within the past weeks and months, when talk spread that he and Hammes now prefer a location in center city.

During a presentation to the Allentown Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday, Pawlowski briefly mentioned the waterfront. He said the city will use a \$300,000 PennDOT grant to develop a master plan for the land, but did not mention the arena or Hammes being part of those plans.

City officials have reason not to disclose an exact location. Their desire to build an arena will probably drive up prices in target areas, such as Seventh Street, making the overall project more expensive and potentially dragging out the land acquisition process.

The Phantoms hope to start playing in Allentown for the 2013-14 season. With such a tight schedule, any setbacks could endanger the project and disappoint eager fans.

Efforts to buy properties will begin during the next 100 days, as Hammes undertakes an aggressive schedule to test soil, assess environmental, financial and community impacts and select the best site. Dunn did not rule out the potential of taking property through eminent domain.

The arena would be the permanent home of the Phantoms, a team that develops players for the Philadelphia Flyers and plays in a league that is one step below the National Hockey League. The team would be the hockey equivalent of the IronPigs, a feeder team for the Philadelphia Phillies.

The Brooks Group chose Allentown as the new location for the team after its previous home, the Spectrum in Philadelphia, was marked for demolition. The Phantoms have been playing in Glens Falls, N.Y., while the owners prepare a permanent home.

Rob Brooks of the Brooks Group told the chamber he anticipates the Phantoms will have a large following in Allentown. He also said he prefers minor league teams and stadiums because there is more flexibility to be creative and to integrate with the community.

"We really look forward to bringing the Phantoms here to Allentown," Brooks said.

The majority of the project will be financed with a bond issue that would be repaid using a first-of-its-kind, 130-acre taxing district authorized in state legislation. The bill dedicates all state tax money generated in the district for about the next 30 years to go to the development.

The legislation, spearheaded by Sen. Pat Browne, R-Lehigh, and Rep. Jennifer Mann, D-Lehigh, was intentionally written with vague parameters to allow the city some flexibility with the project. The boundaries of the zone are still to be determined.

christopher.baxter@mcall.com

610-778-2283

RIVERFRONT OR CENTER CITY?

City developers appear to favor an arena downtown, but an arena complex along the Lehigh riverfront remains an option. Here are the strengths and weaknesses of each:

Center City

Pros

- Can bring hundreds of thousands of people into the downtown business district.
- Already has roads, sidewalks and other infrastructure to support the complex.
- Location close enough for many to walk to events.

Cons

- Small footprint may make it more difficult to add ancillary businesses such as a convention center, restaurants and a hotel.
- Located in an area some people perceive as a high-crime zone.
- Could cause traffic problems.

Riverfront

Pros

- 130 acres of open space gives developer blank canvas on which to paint.
- Located at the end of the planned American Parkway Bridge, giving easy access to motorists.
- Unique setting on the Lehigh River.

Cons

- Open land would need major road, sidewalk and other infrastructure improvements.
- Isolated from downtown businesses, reducing its chances of boosting the central business district.
- Would chew up land some city planners believe should be reserved for industrial development.
- Difficult site for people to walk to.

MASTER DEVELOPERS

The Hammes Company, Brookfield, Wis, has been hired to build Allentown's arena complex. The sports complexes it has developed include:

- The \$1.6 billion New Meadowlands Stadium, home to the NFL Giants and Jets.
- The \$430 million Ford Field, home to the Detroit Lions
- The \$295 million renovation of Lambeau Field, home of the Green Bay Packers

- The 17,000-seat Kohl Center, home of the University of Wisconsin basketball and hockey teams.
- Mohegan Sun Arena at Casey Plaza, Wilkes-Barre, home of the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins of the American Hockey League and the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Pioneers of the Arena Football League.

100 DAYS TO DEVELOPMENT

Arena developers have adopted an ambitious schedule of what must be done in the next 100 days.

By April 1: Complete public financing plan.

By May 1: Begin acquiring property, complete economic impact and fiscal analysis, study site condition, do environmental review, begin eminent domain process if necessary, complete conceptual arena and events center designs and complete land use plan.

By May 15: Complete preliminary budget, preliminary master plan and preliminary finance plan.

By June 2: Structure interim funding, complete development agreements.

June 2: Authorize development to begin.

Copyright © 2011, [The Morning Call](#)