

New Baltimore arena: City consider alternative sites for replacement for 1st Mariner Arena

By Lorraine Mirabella and Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, November 11, 2010

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and economic development officials are exploring alternative locations for a new indoor sports and concert arena to replace the aging 1st Mariner Arena — signaling the possible resurrection of a massive capital project that had been stalled by the recession.

City officials are evaluating possible locations, financing and other aspects of the new arena planned for downtown's west side, Rawlings-Blake said Thursday. The project has been in limbo since 2008 when the city put off selecting a developer for the project, conceived as an 18,500-seat facility that would cost at least \$300 million and rise at the current site.

"Given the current economy and its impact on the state and city budgets, it is important and prudent to explore many alternatives, including the location and potential financing options," Rawlings-Blake said in a statement.

City boosters, including the mayor and M.J. "Jay" Brodie, president of the Baltimore Development Corp., contend that a new venue could build on the success of 1st Mariner, which has drawn such acts as Bruce Springsteen, Beyonce, and the Rolling Stones, despite its dilapidated condition.

A clear advantage of choosing an alternative site: 1st Mariner could continue to operate while construction is under way elsewhere. Under the previous plan, the arena would have been razed and the city would have been without a major concert and events venue, potentially for several years.

Few details have emerged about alternative proposals. But Rawlings-Blake emphasized that the arena could be successful with private-sector support, and Brodie acknowledged that the scope of the project could change. "We will regroup to explore potential sites where the new arena could be located and to reevaluate the project's scope," Brodie said in a statement.

One potential site could be near the Baltimore Convention Center. City officials have long talked of the need to expand now that Baltimore has a hotel dedicated to catering to convention-goers — the Hilton Baltimore Convention Center Hotel — which has begun to help the city land more conventions.

Baltimore City Councilman William H. Cole IV, whose district includes 1st Mariner, said he sees benefits to combining the arena and convention center operations as other cities have done.

"Big conventions can fill an arena just like concerts and soccer games, if they're built the same way," he said. "You have two needs — more convention space and a new arena. Could you combine the two? A lot of cities have gone in that direction and it makes a lot of sense."

He said the arena needs to be updated and include space for conventions to make Baltimore competitive with comparably sized cities. "We're running into real capacity issues," he said. "The old portion of the convention center is nearly 30 years old, and the new building is too small."

Other locations could emerge as the new arena site. The mayor's office and other officials declined to discuss if there were a preferred alternative location.

Big plans

Four developers responded in November 2008 to a request for arena proposals from the Baltimore Development Corp., the city's quasi-public development arm.

Officials envisioned a facility large enough to draw big concerts and acts and potentially attract a professional sports team. Each proposal included ideas that could be incorporated into the new development, such as a seven-screen movie theater, a hotel, a concert hall, offices or street-level shops.

Cole cautioned that city officials shouldn't pin their hopes on luring a major league basketball or hockey league to Baltimore with the promise of a new arena — as previous administrations had hoped — because neither sport appears poised to expand.

He also said that building at a different site would allow the city to continue booking top acts each year at the existing arena, such as the circus and "Disney on Ice." "You can't tell Ringling Brothers you're going to close for two years and expect them to keep you on their schedule," he said. "You don't just hit pause and promise to come back in two years."

Relocating the arena would make sense and jibe with plans for overall west side redevelopment, said Ronald M. Kreitner, executive director of WestSide Renaissance Inc., a nonprofit organization that promotes west-side redevelopment.

Building an arena on a new site would open up the current arena site for redevelopment, which could help link the University of Maryland and downtown offices. Kreitner said that site — once the old arena is razed — could be used for university facilities, a mixed-use development with a public space, or a new courthouse.

"There's a great opportunity to do a more downtown-friendly development on the arena site, and at the same time explore locations that would keep the arena near the edge of the downtown for conventions," he said. "If there's a way to develop a new arena that enhances the convention facilities, that becomes a plus."

The arena today

1st Mariner Arena, which seats just over 14,000, is home to the Baltimore Blast indoor soccer team. The facility has bucked trends and seen its profits grow despite being in need of renovations with cramped corridors, poor sight lines, too few bathrooms and rundown mechanical systems. City leaders have long studied replacing the arena, built in 1962 as the Baltimore Civic Center.

"The development of a new arena would extend this recent momentum to serve the population of Baltimore City and the entire state with a strong mixture of concerts, family acts and sports exhibitions," Brodie said.

BDC officials had initially hoped to select a developer for the arena project by mid-2009 but at that time said the project would be unlikely to move forward until the economy improves and financing becomes more readily available. The city at that time hoped to create a public-private partnership to finance the project.

A first round of requests for proposals from the city brought in proposals from seven teams with plans ranging from keeping the facility in its current spot to building it in Canton, Westport or South Baltimore. But Gov. Martin O'Malley and former Mayor Sheila Dixon rejected sites outside the downtown's west side, and put out a new call for proposals, saying the current site would help anchor the west side revitalization.

The four developers that submitted proposals included Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, ESmith Legacy Inc., the Arena Development Group, and Cormony Development.