

SUNYA favored for Albany County civic center

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New developments in the controversy over where to build an Albany County civic center appear to favor a State University at Albany proposal over a Latham site pushed by businessman Joseph N. Futia Sr.

Analysis

Among the developments is a disclosure that the civic center commission appointed by Albany County Executive James J. Coyne is "very seriously considering" whether the center must be larger than that proposed by Futia.

Futia and Coyne have proposed a facility with 6,000 permanent seats, with room for 4,000 more for concerts.

Alan V. Iselin, president of the SUNYA University Council, Tuesday said details of the university's proposal have yet to be developed, but it would have a "minimum" of 10,000 permanent seats, with room for 3,000-4,000 more for concerts.

Thomas Cairns, a Colonie real estate agent who heads the commission, said Tuesday the panel's consideration of a bigger facility is based largely on a meeting earlier that day with Ned Harkness, president of the Olympic Regional Development Authority. Harkness' extensive sports and arena management background includes a stint as director

of the Glens Falls Civic Center.

Harkness suggested a civic center of 12,000-15,000 seats, Cairns told reporters after a commission meeting Tuesday in Colonie Memorial Town Hall.

"This commission is very seriously considering that factor and obviously we've got to consider the cost of that factor," Cairns said.

The commission chairman said Harkness would not comment directly on the Futia or SUNYA sites, but was "enthusiastic" about a larger civic center in general.

Cairns also did not venture an opinion on either proposal. He said the commission will study both, along with any other proposals forthcoming, in the next few weeks.

However, in addition to the size consideration, two developments appear to give the SUNYA proposal a better chance of winning than previously thought.

One is the position expressed last week by Albany Mayor Thomas M. Whalen III for the SUNYA site.

Whalen is pushing the university site at Washington Avenue and Fuller Road because part of it is in the city. Whalen and Iselin said a center built there would have financial support from the city and university, although they have provided no details.

While Whalen has no official capacity in county government, his unofficial clout was demonstrated several weeks ago when county officials said they

were considering reducing the amount of sales tax revenue the county gives Albany and other municipalities. Largely because of the mayor's lobbying of county legislators, that proposal was dropped.

The other development is the position of the county legislator with perhaps the most influence over where the civic center will go: Democrat Harold L. Joyce, chairman of the powerful county Finance Committee. Joyce, also a member of the civic center commission, is expected to replace Richard M. Meyers as legislature majority leader in January.

Joyce publicly supported Futia's proposal shortly after Coyne announced it Oct. 20. While agreeing with Whalen and other Albany residents who wanted the center built in the city, Joyce said that was unlikely because there was no firm proposal for such a facility.

On Tuesday, however, Joyce expressed support for both Futia's and SUNYA's proposals.

"I like it," he said of the university proposal. "I understand there's some problems with it."

Among those he mentioned were approval by the state Legislature and potential conflicts between SUNYA events and others.

"I'm not sure they can't resolve some of those problems," he said. "If they can resolve the problems that I've heard of, it would certainly be an

advantage to the city of Albany, and I am a city legislator."

The legislator said he considers Futia's proposal "the best plan in town" at this point, because the university has not issued a formal report on its proposal. That is to come around Jan. 23.

Joyce said he will wait for the commission to study the issue further before deciding which proposal to support.

The SUNYA proposal would require approval from the state Legislature. Iselin said he believes approval would be forthcoming "if we have a sound proposal."

Meanwhile, Coyne agreed after the commission meeting that the proposed center should be larger than he and Futia originally proposed. He said Futia's center could hold more seats by placing the basketball court over the hockey floor, rather than next to each other.

Futia said his proposal included room for possible addition of 3,000 permanent seats in a second tier. However, he said his plan calls for the addition at a later date, and he said he did not know how much that would add to the \$11 million cost he has projected for the center.

Futia called the SUNYA proposal "pie in the sky," adding, "They've been trying to do it for 20 years. Are they going to take another 20?"