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Gene
Levy



Levy column...

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Certainly, Albany Mayor Whalen's proposed 12,000-15,000 seat center at the intersection of Fuller Road and the Washington Avenue Extension fills that bill.

The trouble might come in trying to fill that many seats. You may get those numbers for a concert or a business convention, but certainly not for the Patroons, AHL, Major Indoor Soccer League, Section II basketball championships or an Uncle Sam Boxing Club card.

Needless to say, you don't need a tenth that number of seats for a Division III basketball game between Albany State and Oneonta State.

Which leads us to an obvious question: What level of indoor sports *would* require that many seats?

The only answers: The NBA and NHL, and neither of them would begin looking at an expansion site with fewer than 15,000 seats.

Any idea of us having a major league team is exciting, to be sure, but all of us who lived through the attempts of the Lupe family to bring a major league franchise from the the now-defunct American Basketball Association into a proposed 15,000-seat Schenectady arena can't help but be cynical.

Nearly as exciting would be a move by Albany State to Division I, which would seem the only the only reasonable course for Dick Sauers' program if a SUNYA site ever materialized. Who knows but that Division I Siena might have to play the Great Danes under those circumstances.

What's needed now, however, isn't speculation or guessing games. The commission studying the civic center proposals owes us an explanation of what we can expect to see in any new building, whether it be in Albany, Latham or East Greenbush.

Until then, here's one fan who doesn't mind the status quo. The Patroons and Red Wings are both competitive for divisional titles, and RPI has a 16-2 record in its first hockey season in its refurbished arena. Compared to the past, that's saying a lot.

If we need more, I wish somebody would tell me why.

What would they put in new civic center?

"What's in it for me?"

Whether you're talking a land deal in Florida, a dining club or a Super Bowl office pool, the odds are you won't plunk down your hard-earned bucks without getting an answer to that question.

That's why it amuses me so much to hear all the talk about the proposed civic center with scarcely a mention given to what's in it for us.

It almost sounds unpatriotic to question a new playpen, whether it be the 6,000-seat plans of Joe Futia and Jim Coyne in Latham or the 12,000-15,000 seat fantasies of Tom Whalen and the Albany State brass on SUNY land — especially if you're a member of the news media whose unending pleas for a bigtime local look to sports have been heeded only in the last few years.

Yet I fail to see what good the spending of millions of dollars — whether it comes from the coffers of the state, private sources or the taxpayers — will do to promote sports in these parts.

That's not to say sports will be the major contributor to civic center dates and attendance. This being a college town, rock concerts can't be dismissed as a tremendous drawing card in any civic center plans. Yet the prevailing wisdom is that it takes a full schedule of hockey and basketball games to keep a center out of the red.

With that in mind, what role would sports play in a civic center?

Let's take the proposed site adjacent to the Colonie Coliseum. Supposedly, it would seat 6,000 for sports and 10,000 for rock concerts. I'm sure my kids wouldn't mind the convenience of not having to travel to the Saratoga Performing Arts Center or the Glens Falls Civic Center to hear the Pretenders or U2. I might even fight the traffic to be entertained by the more sedate Frank Sinatra or Liza Minelli.

But since we're dealing in sports, let's analyze the point: What would we have?

More seats for the Patroons, obviously. But, despite the good response of Continental Basketball Association fans, sellouts have been few and far between at the Washington Avenue Armory, which has fewer than half that number of seats. It could be argued a more convenient, larger and more modern playpen in Latham would win them more fans, yet an equally convincing argument could be made that basketball is a city sport which might not have the same appeal in the suburbs.

As for an American Hockey League team, what would be the cost of a court fight it would probably take to get a franchise placed in Latham over Glens Falls' certain opposition?

Would it be worth winning the battle if it also meant destroying, in effect, the Glens Falls Civic Center? That's a legitimate concern, not just for hockey, because a Latham facility would be battling similar arenas in Glens Falls, Lake Placid and at a refurbished RPI in Troy for the entire range of events, athletic and otherwise.

If not Latham, then where? If not 6,000 seats, then how many? Some of my media brethren would have arena planners "think big."

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