

McKownville: News And Comment

By LINDSAY CHILDS

Fliers were being passed around this past week announcing the McKownville Improvement Association's second annual "Meet Neighbor for Dinner" banquet at the Tom Sawyer Motor Inn on Thursday, Feb. 16.

The featured speaker will be Assemblyman Richard J. Conners, who, because of change in district boundaries, recently became the assemblyman representing McKownville. The evening will be a good chance to meet our "new" assemblyman.

Also expected to be on hand will be Kevin and Barbara Moss. As politicians are wont to do, Supervisor Moss is also likely to have a word or two to say.

The musical treat of the evening, arranged by Don Webster, will be the Guilderland High School woodwind quintet.

The evening begins with cocktails (cash bar) at 6 p.m., with dinner beginning at 7 p.m. Entrees to choose from are London broil (very tasty last year) and broiled ocean scrod (which got raves last year). Included in the dinner are fruit cup, potato, vegetable, salad, apple pie, and coffee or tea. The price for everything except the cash bar is \$12.50 per person, including tax and gratuity.

What better way to spend a Thursday evening in February? To make a reservation, contact Steve Witham, 1 Norwood St., Albany 12203, 482-4173, by Monday, Feb. 13.

We're looking forward to the evening.

Proposed Civic Center

It's marvelous how much money people want to spend to alter the environment around McKownville. The Pyramid Co. is spending some \$85 million on the Crossgates Mall. The state and federal highway authorities plan to spend perhaps \$40 million to alter the interstate highways at our border. Now SUNY wishes to have some more millions spent for a civic center right at our north doorstep.

We can't tell you about the SUNY civic center proposal, because the proposal has not been made public when this column was written. The

proposal was due to go to the Cairns committee, the Albany County Legislature committee which is studying the various civic center proposals, last Monday, and was to be released to the public on Thursday, Feb. 2, the date of this paper. So you should be reading about it on Friday, Feb. 3 in the daily press.

The locations publicly mentioned for the civic center now include:

—The original site in Latham, by the Coliseum and the new intersection of the Northway and Alternate Route 7;

—The SUNY site, by Fuller Road and Washington Ave. Extension;

—Near Exit 23 of the Thruway;

—On the north side of Albany near Exit 6 of I-90;

—On Madison Ave. just east of the Empire State Plaza in downtown Albany;

—Next to Union Station in downtown Albany; and

—Off I-90 in Rensselaer County.

Two unnamed Colonie sites have also been mentioned. It is reasonable to assume that at least one of them is east of Wolf Road near Exit 4 in the area once referred to as the "superblock."

Recent speculation suggests that the SUNY site may not be the front-runner at this stage. County Executive James Coyne has expressed little or no interest in the SUNY site, supporting in public either the Latham site or, more recently, a downtown Albany site.

An informal and highly unscientific telephone poll on WQBK found popular sentiment favoring a downtown Albany site. And the strongest supporter of the SUNY site, Albany Mayor Thomas Whalen, must be feeling some pressure to support a downtown Albany location because of its clear advantages to the downtown business community, rather than the SUNY location, which would attract business away from downtown.

The decision as to where to place a civic center is complicated and interesting. It is a real-life version of a game played at the Crossgates Mall hearings in 1980.

Under the State Environmental Quality Review Act, the Pyramid Corporation was required to do an analysis of alternative sites, to show that the Crossgates site in Westmere was the only reasonable location for the proposed mall. The analysis that was prepared had very much the character of an ad-hoc justification for the site Pyramid already had under its control. Naturally, by their analysis, the Westmere site was the best.

But with the civic center, the Cairns committee, or, if Rensselaer County Executive William Murphy has his way, a bipartisan state commission, will really have to decide what the best location for a civic center is. The deck is not already stacked.

So having no news to report on the civic center this week, and having enjoyed playing alternative-site-analysis games at the Crossgates hearings, we thought we would try to figure out where the civic center ought to be located. Of course the SUNY site will not win out in our analysis — we admit our bias ahead of time. But neither will downtown Albany, as you will see.

Before reading any further, ask yourself: Where do you think the civic center ought to be located? And why?

The business generated by a civic center is what makes public officials and chambers of commerce excited about the location question.

As we understand it, the civic center would be used in two ways — as an exposition hall, and as an arena for special events and sports.

As an exposition and convention hall, the center has some potential to draw to Albany large numbers of out-of-town visitors who would need to eat, and sleep, and be entertained, and purchase gifts for the kids back home. Those visitors would naturally tend to do this spending right near the civic center, and they would create a market for motels, restaurants, shops, if those outlets are not already nearby.

As an arena, the center would draw mostly patrons from the Capital District. Restaurants and shops near the center would naturally benefit from the increased traffic down to the area by the center.

Rensselaer County officials are eager to have the center east of the Hudson River because of the center's potential for promoting economic development nearby. Interstate 90 has not yet provided the same kind of incentive for development in Rensselaer County which the Northway provided in Saratoga County — vast housing tracts, shopping centers, industry. The civic center could spur some of that development.

The downtown Albany merchants are eager to have the civic center downtown, either on Madison Ave. across from the cathedral or next to Union Station, because the center visitors would do their spending mostly in downtown Albany. The economy of the downtown area has been eroding

over most the past 30 years, as retail stores and hotels have fled downtown, first for the Central Ave. area, and then to the Northway corridor. The civic center would help continue the reversal of that trend, and continue the rebirth of downtown Albany.

By contrast, some McKownville residents, perhaps many of them, are eager not to have the civic center on the SUNY site because of its potential for encouraging further commercial development. The McKownville area is choking with development, with more than its share of motels, restaurants, office buildings and shopping centers. The area does not need a civic center as a spur for further economic development.

My basis for choosing location is that a civic center should be placed where it will be the most successful. From what we have read, civic centers usually lose money. Which location would give the center the best chance to not lose money?

The success of the civic center depends on its ability to attract

large numbers of Capital District residents on a frequent basis. To do this best, the center should have very easy access via interstate highways from all the main population centers of the region, and plenty of parking.

But a special events and sports arena needs more than just accessibility. It also needs to be thought of as a regional facility. The sports teams which use it should be thought of as representing the region, not just a part of it.

Regionality is a peculiar problem in the Capital District. The Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area has a population of 800,000 people, making it approximately the 50th largest metropolitan area in the nation. But because of the fragmentation of the population around three central cores, Albany, Schenectady and Troy, instead of one, the area does not support cultural institutions of a quality which would be expected for a population this size.

Museums, theatres, musical organizations, sports teams and other public attraction tend to develop an identification with one of the urban cores, Albany, Schenectady or Troy, instead of being regional, and so tend to be supported by only a portion of the population of the region as a result. Only the broadcast media, especially Channel 17 and the two public radio stations, and certain service institutions, such as the Albany County Airport, and, in retailing, Colonie Center, are truly regional and take full advantage of the region's population base.

A critical aspect of location relates to the local newspapers. The Capital District has a very competitive newspaper market. But none of the papers has circulation covering the entire region. The Gazette's circulation east of the Northway is small, and the Hearst papers' circulation in Schenectady County and western Saratoga County is small. And Troy has its own papers. Part of the fragmentation of the region is caused by the lack of a regionwide newspaper.

A sports and special events arena, to draw well from the whole Capital District, has to be thought of as part of each of the urban areas within the region. It has to be close enough to Albany to be well covered by the Albany papers, close enough to Schenectady to be covered well by the Gazette, close enough to Troy to be covered by the Record.

The only area in the Capital District which fits is the Northway corridor. Guelderland, Colonie, and southern Saratoga County are the areas in which the Gazette and the Hearst papers are competing for circulation. The most central location within that corridor is Colonie. So the best location in the Capital District for a regional facility is the stretch of the Northway from Exits 2 to 7.

The Northway corridor as a location for a sports arena follows the precedent of Heritage Park, and of other metropolitan areas with more than one urban core. In the Dallas-Fort Worth area, the sports stadium is in Irving, halfway between. In Minneapolis, the sports arena is in Bloomington, not in Minneapolis or St. Paul. So should it be in the Capital District.

The SUNY site is in the Northway corridor, but is too identified with Albany, and is too far south to draw well from Troy and Saratoga county. It also has poor and irreparable access from the interstate highway system.

The Latham site near Exit 7, originally proposed by Mr. Coyne, is, from a regional standpoint, nearly ideal. It is more convenient to all three urban cores than any location farther south. It is also convenient to Saratoga County. Once residents of Delmar get used to Alternate Route 7, it will even be convenient to them.

A site east or west of Wolf Road near Albany-Shaker Road might be even better. As a location for a convention center, the area is very well supplied with motels, restaurants and retailing. Being near the airport, its convenience for statewide and northeast U.S. conventions would be excellent. And as a location for a sports and special events arena it is almost as accessible from all parts of the Capital District, and almost as central from a regional viewpoint, as the Latham site.

Of course, traffic conditions near Exit 4 are less than ideal. But perhaps a civic center will give DOT a good excuse to create Exit 3 or rebuild Exit 4 into a respectable interchange — one which is desperately needed anyway.

So I think Mr. Coyne's original instincts were fairly sound. But I wouldn't be surprised if one or both of the mystery Colonie sites are right by Exit 4 of the Northway, near the north end of Wolf Road. And it wouldn't surprise me if that location is the ultimate choice.

Was that your choice?