

Civic responsibilities

The debate over a civic center for Albany County continues to be more distracting than instructive.

Ever since Albany County Executive James Coyne raised the possibility of a center during his re-election campaign last fall, the discussion has been marked by disagreements over where to build it. Lost amid the proposals and counter-proposals was the central question: Why build one at all?

Now there's an added reason to raise that question: Albany Mayor Thomas Whalen III is flirting with a commuter tax for his city, and Mr. Coyne stands ready to support it.

Though the tax may appear to have little bearing on the civic center, just the opposite is true. To appreciate the connection, first consider the context:

The mayor is searching desperately for ways to put his city on sound financial footing. A substantial increase in state aid would be one way of achieving stability, but failing that, it might be necessary to impose a tax on those who commute from the suburbs to work in Albany. The county executive sympathizes with the mayor's position, even though the tax would affect surrounding towns like Guilderland and Colonie — Mr. Coyne's constituency.

At the same time, both the mayor and the executive look with favor on a civic center in downtown Albany. The mayor has good reasons for doing so: Downtown can provide support services to center patrons, and the nearby Empire State Plaza convention center is a natural complement.

He's right. If there is to be a center, it makes sense to build it where it is likely to attract the maximum number of patrons year round. Mr. Coyne, meanwhile, sees yet another advantage in building downtown — a chance for state funding.

But now for the troublesome part: If Albany is having such a hard time paying its bills, then why plunge into such an expensive and risky project as a civic center?

Experience shows civic centers rarely turn a profit, and are all but certain to run in the red during start-up years. Even if state and federal funds were approved for construction, who would shoulder the early operating deficits? Without a private investor around, there's only one answer — the taxpayers.

Given his struggle to avoid further taxes in the city, Mayor Whalen would have a hard time justifying even a portion of the center's upkeep. As for the county, Mr. Coyne might find it hard to explain why commuters should be doubly billed — once for working in Albany and once to maintain a civic center there.

Because of the unique arrangement between the state and county during the building of the Empire State Plaza, there's a chance some plaza bonds might be used to build a center. But the Albany County Legislature should proceed cautiously before giving approval.

At the very least, lawmakers should wait until the state Urban Development Corp. completes its feasibility study on a sports complex in Albany. In the meantime, they should ignore the clamor of competing developers' proposals and resist the pressure to build now and pay later.

They have always had good reason to remain calm amid the tumult and insist on all the facts and figures surrounding this project. Now, with talk of a commuter tax, they have added reason to do so.
