

# Area civic center: Who needs it?

I'm probably the only one around who hasn't put in my two cents on those zany plans for a civic center in the Albany area. Maybe I should make that two million.

I guess I've held back because of my past experiences as a sports editor, when so much was promised and nothing was delivered.

The disappointment that sticks out in my mind harks back a dozen years ago when a sharp promoter came down the pike and sold the Lupe family of Schenectady a bill of goods on a sports complex to end all sports complexes.

Nothing came of it, of course. The sharpie snuck out of town, leaving a trail of broken dreams and an unpaid motel bill.

There were other ideas for civic centers and big-time sports over the years, all which fizzled and left me with little enthusiasm to become involved.

But I can't sit still any longer.

This whole mad, irrational push for a civic center has become an insult to taxpayers, a joke to those with a keen eye for sports, a needless embarrassment to politicians and a hot potato that poses a batch of unanswered questions.

It's a funny world. Bring up waste removal, municipal bonding or library funding and no one gives a hoot. Mention



a civic center and everyone wants to salute the flag and eat apple pie.

And for politicians to play on these emotions is to their shame.

In fact, the whole civic center issue has been twisted to the point where it is no longer a possibility to be explored but an obligation to be met.

There're a lot of people you can point a finger at for starting all this hysteria, but Jim Coyne has to be in front of the line.

Coyne may be pleasant, well-intending and a popular vote-getter, but he apparently fails to realize there is more to life than the Patroons, the Albany-Colonie A's and a civic center. As a prime alternate, how about striving for more efficient government?

And the fact the Albany County exec announced plans for a playpen a few days before election smacks of political opportunism at its worst. But now that the idea has been put to test, Coyne has been spending most of his time waffling on the

size and location, while the taxpayer waits in the background ready to pick up the tab.

But Coyne isn't alone in this regrettable scenario. There are others, of political stripe and otherwise.

There's Joe Futia, ready to jump on the bandwagon and build a civic center anywhere if someone will give him a wink and an assist.

But if a civic center is such a good deal, why does Futia need public assistance? You'd think private businessmen would be lined up for blocks for such a sure-fire winner.

Of course, it isn't sure-fire. The smart money's staying away. The taxpayers' money is what is being toyed with.

Futia has made more than one trip over to Troy, where Rensselaer County exec William Murphy apparently can't stand to let anybody hog the spotlight.

Murphy has always impressed me as a sharp, progressive thinker, but his civic center posture taints this image.

Then we move into the city of Albany and there sits Tom Whalen, still learning, still searching, still trying to undo parts of the past and look to the future.

But one day the mayor is announcing the city is going down the drain and needs a commuter tax; the next he is warmly talking about a civic center.

If Albany is strapped to the point where

it is toying with tapping the suburbs, how can building a project that could cost millions and turn out to be a white elephant be justified?

And then there is State University at Albany, probably the cagiest of the whole bunch.

The SUNYA people would have the city and county pitch in \$15 million and the state contribute \$10 million. The result would be a spanking-new field house and adjacent civic center.

But isn't this the same university system that is forever crying the blues over lack of money, teacher cutbacks, curtailing curriculums, higher tuition costs and the like?

Yet, \$10 million of state money — a tenth of the proposed sports lottery payoff — would be used to help build a place for fun and games. Where are the priorities? (And remember this is the same state that is having trouble operating a table-top-size skating rink at Albany's Empire State Plaza.)

The absurdities and doubts keep popping up almost as fast as the proposed sites, and it all prompts one final question by this taxpayer who is among the forgotten people in this growing mess:

Haven't our elected officials anything better to do than spend their time pursuing something for which there is no site, no financing and no proven need?

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2/6/84