

McKownville: News And Comment

By LINDSAY CHILDS

The SUNY civic center proposal was presented to the Albany County Legislative Committee headed by Thomas Cairns with appropriate media coverage two weeks ago today, and everyone is waiting around (at this writing) to see whether there really are more South Mall bonds to finance a civic center downtown, whether the State Urban Development Corporation will consider a civic center quickly enough for County Executive Jim Coyne, and what the Beltrone and Union Station proposals look like.

Mr. Coyne has indicated that he plans to present his recommendation for a site to the County Legislature at its regular March meeting.

While waiting, you can read the rest of this column, which has the theme, "what you might have wanted to know about the SUNY civic center but didn't know what to ask."

What Is This SUNY Proposal, Anyway?

The administration of SUNY at Albany, McKownville's "colossus of the north," is proposing that a civic center be built on a 70-acre parcel bounded by Washington Ave. Extension, Fuller Road, the Northway, and the Albany-Guilderland boundary just north of Warren and Mercer Streets. The civic center would be a multi-use arena seating 11,000 for basketball, 11,700 for concerts and 10,000 for hockey. Attached to the civic center would be a fieldhouse, owned and utilized by the university for physical education and sports, which, when not used by the university, would be available for additional space for, say, large conventions or trade shows.

Why Is SUNY Interested?

SUNY at Albany has a campus reputedly designed for a student body of 5,000, but has over three times that many students. In particular, its physical education facilities are extremely cramped (as are, it is worth noting, its dormitories, its classroom facilities, its office space, its campus center, its cafeteria and its library).

The fieldhouse-civic center idea

is a way of solving the overcrowding of its gym without having to wait in line for many years until the State University Construction Fund recovers its solvency after financing the completion of the SUNY at Buffalo campus and various other incomplete projects in the SUNY system. The arena would provide a refuge for everyone to keep dry during commencement.

The arena would also set the stage to allow the campus to launch into big-time college basketball and hockey. Some administrators, looking at large state-supported universities around the nation, see some relationship between the level of public (and legislative) support for the schools and the degree of success of their sports teams.

What Would It Be Used For?

The projected revenue estimates for the civic center assume the following use for the center:

- Shows, such as popular music, family-type (Sesame Street), and big-name entertainers, 35 events per year;

- Pro sports, eight exhibitions plus 26 Patroons home basketball games;

- College basketball, 15 games plus a tournament;

- High school basketball and hockey tournaments, a total of 10 days;

- A tennis tournament (indoor pro), during five days;

- A circus, an ice show, and other shows, totaling 14 days;

- Five trade shows, three days each;

- Three large and four medium conventions.

The civic center would be in use an estimated 182 days per year, excluding days when the center would be open and usable for recreational ice skating (at a \$2.00 admission fee).

The official revenue projection estimates that the arena will fill up only for 12 rock/country concerts and for a four-day ice show. A major basketball exhibition is estimated to draw 9,000, and a couple of shows will draw as much. Otherwise, 8,000 seats would suffice.

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Will the civic center at the SUNY site be a regional facility?

It doesn't seem so. Clough, Harbour and Associates did a traffic study for the SUNY facility, and estimated the percentages of traffic coming to the facility from various directions. What is particularly interesting about CHA's figures is the low percentage coming off the Thruway and off Washington Ave. Extension from the west. Only 20 percent of the traffic for a major event is expected to come from the west, i.e. from the direction of Schenectady. By contrast, 21 percent would come from I-90 east (Albany, Troy, Rensselaer County), 24 percent from the Northway (Colonie, Latham, Saratoga County), and 33 percent from local highways (Fuller Road, Washington and Western Aves.). If these distributions are realistic (see below), they indicate that a SUNY site is not expected to draw well from Schenectady, and won't be a truly regional facility, serving all the population centers, and not just Albany.

Financial Prospects

Will the civic center lose money? Yes and no. There are three ways to look at this question.

Looking only at net operating profit/loss, there is about an even chance that the center will not lose money. The consultants studied 16 civic centers around the country in metropolitan areas similar to or smaller than Albany's, and found that in 1979 six of them had significant net operating deficits, four of them roughly broke even, and six of them made comfortable operating profits.

However, the cost of the civic center includes the debt service, estimated for the SUNY facility at some \$1.35 million per year. There is no chance that the civic center operating profit, if any, will come

close to covering the debt service.

It is likely to be a loser even after subtracting from the debt service the increased tax revenue — the consultants estimate that the civic center will generate for the city and county of Albany an additional \$545,000 per year in tax revenue. None of the 16 civic centers surveyed around the nation had an operating profit in 1979 which was close to reaching the \$800,000 difference between the debt cost and the increased tax revenue.

On the other hand, aside from the benefits from spending \$25 million to construct the center, the usual economic "multiplier" model predicts that the civic center will generate \$20.4 million in new business in Albany County annually. Perhaps the generation of so much new business helps justify building a civic center even if it will lose money.

What about traffic impacts of the civic center?

Who knows, really? Traffic estimates, it seems, are really intelligent guesses. One of the amusing aspects of reading the SUNY civic center report is to see how much the Clough, Harbour traffic estimates differ from those of Raymond Keyes, the traffic consultant who did the work for Crossgates. (Amusing, of course, only if you enjoy looking at numbers. I do.)

Both Crossgates and civic center traffic would use the same highways, and so both Clough, Harbour and Keyes provided traffic counts for the intersection of Fuller Road and Washington Ave. Extension, Keyes in 1978, C-H in 1979. Here are some comparisons of their counts at the peak afternoon hour of 4:30 to 5:30 on a weekday:

Northbound, Fuller, through:
CH, 390; Keyes, 290 vehicles during the hour.

Southbound, Fuller, through:
CH, 410, Keyes, 330.

Eastbound, Washington Ave., left turn: CH, 90, Keyes, 145.

Westbound, Washington Ave., left: CH, 90, Keyes, 45.

These are rather large differences.

Both the civic center and the Crossgates Mall are thought of as regional facilities, so presumably each would draw patrons from around the Capital District in equal proportions. But here are the distribution percentages of vehicles arriving at the mall, and at the civic center, according to the two consultants:

Origin	CH Civic Ctr.	Keyes Xgates Mall
Wash. Ave., west	10	15
Wash. Ave., east	6	15
Northway	24	15
Thruway	12	19
I-90, east	21	11
Fuller, north	10	5
Western, west	7	5
Western, east	10	15

With these kinds of disagreements, any predictions about traffic should be taken with some suspicion.

OK, I have salt shaker in hand. What does Clough-Harbour say about the traffic impacts of the SUNY civic center?

With Clough-Harbour's estimates of traffic, both Fuller Road and Washington Ave. Extension will be beyond capacity unless some 800 of the 2,800 cars expected for a major event use the SUNY perimeter road to reach the civic center. Even so, based on the Clough, Harbour data, your correspondent estimates that the intersection of the two highways will be beyond capacity for major events unless the left turn from westbound Washington Avenue to southbound Fuller Road is widened to two lanes. With that improvement, the intersection will be barely acceptable.

What about the impact of the civic center on McKownville?

The estimated impact on highways in McKownville by the civic center for a major sports event is as follows:

—Eastbound traffic on Western

—Eastbound traffic on Western Ave. in Westmere, west of Cross-gates, would increase by about 19 percent in the 7-8 p.m. hour.

—Westbound traffic on Western Ave. in McKownville, east of Fuller Road, would increase by about 28 percent in the 7-8 p.m. hour.

—Northbound traffic on Fuller Road in McKownville would increase by around 190 percent, increasing from about 260 cars per hour to about 750 cars per hour, or from one car about every 14 seconds to one car about every 5 seconds during the 7-8 p.m. hour.

All those cars would be leaving the civic center three hours later, and would create major increases in traffic along both Fuller Road and Western Ave. during the hour the traffic would be departing.

Clough-Harbour's idea of routing civic center traffic onto the SUNY perimeter roads could be extended to help relieve some of that impact. Traffic on Western Ave. from the west could be encouraged to use the Northway and I-90 to get to the facility, and traffic on Western Ave. from the east could be encouraged to pick up the campus perimeter road at the Albany city line. Perhaps signs would be helpful.

One of the most ominous items in the civic center prospectus is the proposal to obtain revenue from parking. The center would attract 300,000 cars per year, and the economic analysis suggests charging a parking fee of \$1 per car. Many of those cars, for popular events, would end up parking on the SUNY campus. But Warren, Mercer and Providence Sts. are hardly farther from the civic center site than the parking lots on the campus, and many patrons will discover that they can park free on the residential streets instead of for a dollar on the SUNY campus, just as conveniently.

This kind of problem arose on a small scale with Coco's and Elmwood St., and until Coco's expanded its parking lot it was a "no-win" situation for the residents. The only way the town could restrict Coco's parking on Elmwood St. was by restricting parking for all, thereby inconveni-

encing the residents. Without a creative solution, the situation would be much worse with the civic center.

One can hope that the university administration will be sensitive to the concerns of the residents of McKownville, many of whom are members of the university community. Vice President for University Affairs Lewis Welch has offered to meet with local residents

to find out their concerns and if these concerns can be brought up early, and the SUNY site is the ultimate location for the civic center, perhaps the impact on McKownville can be minimized.

As Mayor Whalen wrote to Mr. Cairns recently: "I am sure you realize, as do I, that Vince O'Leary is not about to embark on a program which will create undue hardships on his neighbors." Let us hope that is true.