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## THE ARENA OF POSSIBILITIES

On a regular basis, customers eating lunch at Fat Man's Mill Cafe on Greene Street will walk up to its owner, Brad Usry, and share with him their review of the latest event at the James Brown Arena.

Whether it was a Widespread Panic concert, an exhibition game by the Harlem Globetrotters or a live show by Rascal Flatts, his customers will typically tell Usry that they really enjoyed their night out in downtown Augusta.

However, they will also frequently give Usry, the vice chairman of the Augusta-Richmond County Coliseum Authority, a little piece of advice: Augusta needs a new arena.

"Someone came through the restaurant just the other day and said, 'The show was great, but you really need to get that new arena built. That current building sure is old!'" said Usry, chuckling in his restaurant's office. "And you know what I said? I told him, 'You're right.'"

Probably more than anyone else in Augusta, Usry said he is fully aware of the fact that it is time for Augusta to build a new state-of-the-art arena.

"I'm 57 years old. That arena needs to go. I played there when I was around 17 years old, so it's time."

— Brad Usry

"To be honest with you, I was a part of the very first event in the existing arena," Usry said, smiling. "I played basketball at Augusta College and we played the first basketball game there, which also happened to be the first event in that arena."

That fact alone proves the the James Brown Arena has been around for some time, Usry joked.

"I'm 57 years old. That arena needs to go," Usry said, laughing. "I played there when I was around 17 years old, so it's time."

About 40 years ago, the James Brown Arena started out as part of a bigger vision to invigorate Augusta's faltering downtown district.

Back in 1973, the Augusta-Richmond County Coliseum Authority first asked Chinese-born architect I.M. Pei's New York firm to perform the design work and site selection for a new civic center.

While Pei is often referred to as the master of modern architecture, the Augusta-Richmond County Civic Center — now known as the James Brown Arena — has never really been considered a work of art.

But the more than 35-year-old arena has served the community well, hosting a variety of legendary artists over the years including KISS, Elton John, Mötley Crüe, Bon Jovi, Van Halen, Def Leppard and Alabama.

However, the fact of the matter is, the James Brown Arena is suffering from "multiple physical deficiencies," especially compared to modern arenas around the country, according to a 2014 feasibility and economic impact study performed by AECOM, a Los Angeles-based consultant firm.

As a result of its findings, AECOM recommended that the Augusta-Richmond County Coliseum Authority consider building a new 10,000-seat arena at a cost ranging between \$90 million to \$110 million.

Along with the 10,000 regular seats, the proposal for the new arena would include premium seating with 14 luxury suites, 10 loge boxes and 500 club seats.

A brand new facility with the option to purchase premium seating could completely transform a night out in Augusta, Usry said.

“In new arenas around the country, the lighting inside the facility, the concourse and the premium seating are unbelievable. It is beautiful,” Usry said. “I recently went to the Philips Arena in Atlanta to see Garth Brooks and I had no clue what to expect. I knew I had some decent seats because I got them at the club level, but when I got there they had about 15 full restaurants there. And you can actually be sitting there at restaurant, watching the show. I mean, how cool is that? You can be sitting there at a padded, high top chair, enjoying a drink, having something to eat and just relaxing and enjoying the show.”

Now, obviously, the coliseum authority is not looking to build a Philips Arena in Augusta. However, Usry believes concert goers in the CSRA want, deserve and will support a state-of-the-art arena in downtown Augusta.

“When you go to a new arena like that, it is an experience,” Usry said. “You are not just going to a concert. You are going to an experience. And, in this day and time, you should be going to an experience.”

In AECOM’s feasibility study, the consultant listed several regional markets that Augusta is trying to compete against including arenas in Gwinnett County, Ga., North Charleston, S.C., Greenville, S.C., and Jacksonville, Fla.

While those markets are considered larger than the CSRA, AECOM’s study stated that Augusta is “well-located” for touring events, which promoters would find appealing.

But the truth of the matter is, Augusta has a current arena that is “obsolete,” Usry said.

“With the James Brown Arena, I can’t even name all the ways it is obsolete,” Usry said. “The new arenas today are just so welcoming and they have grand concourses. Our concourses are so tiny, there is no natural light and the lack of ladies restrooms is just unbearable. Also, there is no premium seating like luxury boxes, which is tremendous revenue stream for an arena. We get zero dollars from premium boxes.”

As an owner of a local restaurant, Usry said he is also embarrassed by the lack of food options inside the James Brown Arena.

“The concession choices, which are right up my alley, are terrible. I mean, all you can have is popcorn and hotdogs and maybe pizza,” Usry said. “We should have an arena for this community that we could almost have a full-blown meal.”

Even the seating itself inside the arena is incredibly outdated, Usry said.

“The seating is like going back to the 1970s,” he said. “The seats now are much more comfortable in the new arenas and they are much wider.”

Augusta deserves a comfortable arena that can seat up to 10,000 people in order to attract larger shows, Usry added.

“With the James Brown Arena, if you maximize it now, and you have no stage and you just put every seat in there it has 7,800 seats,” Usry said. “But, when you put a stage in, you get down to like 5,800 seats. So people assume we have an 8,000-seat arena, but we don’t really.”

That’s why a new arena with approximately 10,000 useable seats would have such a huge impact on this region, Usry said.

“When we are talking about building an arena with around 9,000 to 10,000 seats, it doesn’t look like a big increase from what we have, but it really is because if you put a stage in the new arena, all of those 10,000 seats would be used,” Usry said. “There would be no seats that would be blocked out.”

The proposed new arena would also include 20,000 square feet of exhibit and meeting space and 2,000 square feet of office space, according to the 2014 study.

While Bird said he cannot discuss the locations that the committee is currently reviewing, he assures the public that the coliseum authority is committed to keeping the arena in the downtown area

Such meeting spaces could be an excellent revenue generator for the arena, Usry said.

Brad-Usry-outside-3 “The revenue being lost from not having decent meeting spaces is unbelievable,” he said. “You’ll hear people say, ‘Well, we got the TEE center for meeting space.’ Well, we do, but there are also other meetings and other events that you need small spaces. But all of our meeting spaces in the current arena are in the basement and they leak. We just spent \$5 million in renovations not too long ago and a ton of it went to just try and control the water throughout the building.”

In fact, the administrative offices inside the arena had to be stripped down and the carpets ripped up because the arena recently experiencing flooding downstairs.

“What a lot of people don’t realize is the arena was built on a lake,” Usry said. “There is a pump in the basement of the arena that runs 24/7, exactly 365 days a year and it has done that since that building was constructed.”

“It was a natural springs down there,” Usry said, chuckling. “So we had a water problem in the arena before it even opened.”

But Usry insists that Chris Bird, the general manager of the Augusta Entertainment Complex, and his staff are doing an outstanding job working with the current conditions of the arena. However, they can only deal with so much.

“The money that we are spending to keep that building operational is amazing,” Usry said. “And sometimes we can’t even wait until the next monthly meeting. Chris (Bird) will send out an email to say, ‘I have to spend \$10,000 to get this fixed to keep the building open.’ We have to say yes. We even had to make some OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) improvements to the arena recently just to meet the minimum standards for OSHA for our workers to make sure nobody gets hurt. So, those things aren’t out there front and center, but they mean a lot.”

While the physical structure of the James Brown Arena is definitely showing its age, the Augusta-Richmond County Coliseum Authority and Spectra — the Comcast-owned company that manages the arena and Bell Auditorium — still have a lot to brag about regarding its finances.

“Spectra is doing a tremendous job and we need to give them a lot of credit,” Usry said. “Not only with the quality of the shows, and the number or volume of shows, but also the diversity of the shows. I mean, this

weekend, we had Boston play on Sunday night and we had Maxwell on Saturday night. Those are two completely different dynamics that were awesome shows, so that is beautiful.”

And ticket sales are clearly reflecting the community’s support of the shows offered by Spectra, Usry said.

“Our revenue is actually up,” Usry said, reviewing the budget numbers for this fiscal year that ended just last month. “We actually made \$804,672 in the black this year versus \$668,034 in fiscal year 2015.”

Those numbers just don’t happen by accident, Usry said. It takes a strong team in place to have two strong fiscal years in a row, he said.

“We have a great team in place with Spectra, for sure,” Usry said. “And the community has embraced the arena and shown its support by buying tickets. But, the reality is, we are past time to get a new arena and I think the community, as a whole, supports it. We just have to be smart in financing it, so it is not a burden on the tax base. We need to have some serious conversations about how we pay for it. But a new arena is something that all of Augusta would be proud of.”

After reviewing this fiscal year’s numbers, Chris Bird, the general manager of the Augusta Entertainment Complex, said he was extremely pleased with the progress that has been made over the past several years.

“Last year was our best year ever in terms of the net operating income, but we just finished this fiscal year, because we are from July 1, 2015, to June 30, 2016, and we actually beat last year’s numbers. So it’s going well,” Bird said, sitting in his office located in the basement of the James Brown arena. “And this year, I think we had 25 more events than last year. We did a total of 129 shows. So, last year was a great year. It was our best year, but this year was even better.”

“I think we are seeing some shows not come back to the arena. Like the circus and shows like Carrie Underwood are too heavy that we can’t hold their productions. They can’t come back. And those are some good revenue generating shows when you can get 20,000 people in to see the circus or 7,000 people for a sold out concert.”

— Chris Bird

Of course, while Bird is reviewing these impressive numbers, he is sitting in an office that has been completely stripped of its carpet and wallpaper along the bottom of the walls and is filled with aging furniture.

Let’s just say, it’s not the kind of office you would proudly display to a national concert promoter.

But Bird said he had no other choice than to pull up the rug and strip the wallpaper because the rain leaked down through the drainage system and began soaking the carpet in the offices to the point it was smelling like mildew.

“We kind of have to get MacGyver-like and Band-Aid things because you don’t want to put millions and millions of dollars into the James Brown Arena given the hope that the city, the community, the university and everyone will come together to do a new arena in the next five years or so,” Bird said. “In this case, you could put carpet down and it might cost \$10,000. But I think staining the concrete a wood color is going to cost us less than \$2,000. So we can get creative, keep it safe, keep the doors open and still make it look aesthetically good enough.”

However, Bird looked over at the dark, floral print couch in his office and chuckled.

“Of course, I don’t think I’m going to show off that couch anytime soon, but we can manage,” he said, laughing. “It’s been a great year and the quality of events has risen. I think that is because promoters and people on a

national scale are seeing that these kinds of markets, the secondary or these tertiary markets as we call them — not the Altantas or the Charlottes, but cities our size — if you are doing it right and the relationships are right, artists of just as good a caliber can be successful in these smaller markets.”

However, the truth of the matter is that the size of James Brown Arena is holding Augusta back from more popular shows, Bird said.

“I think we are seeing some shows not come back to the arena. Like the circus and shows like Carrie Underwood are too heavy that we can’t hold their productions. They can’t come back,” Bird said. “And those are some good revenue generating shows when you can get 20,000 people in to see the circus or 7,000 people for a sold out concert.”

As a result of losing such shows and the aging conditions at the James Brown Arena, Bird said the coliseum authority has moved forward in forming an ad hoc committee to review potential sites for a new arena.

While Bird said he cannot discuss the locations that the committee is currently reviewing, he assures the public that the coliseum authority is committed to keeping the arena in the downtown area.

“It is going to stay downtown,” Bird said, adding that he believes the coliseum authority will soon look to hire the necessary professionals to develop a plan in order to design, build and pay for a new arena. “The public deserves to see more. We put this project out there during the SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) meetings, but our next step really is to get professionals involved.”

“We need to keep the doors open here, but we also need to hire a consultant, architect, a Realtor and deal with land acquisition, so all of these things play into this \$6 million pot.”

— Chris Bird

The coliseum authority had originally asked for \$15 million from the SPLOST 7 revenue, but the Augusta Commission authorized only \$6 million in the package that was approved by voters.

Some of that funding will be required to maintain the current facility, but the coliseum authority is looking to also use part of the \$6 million to help move forward on building a new arena, Bird said.

“We need to keep the doors open here, but we also need to hire a consultant, architect, a Realtor and deal with land acquisition, so all of these things play into this \$6 million pot,” Bird said. “The big questions right now are: Where will we build it? How is it going to get paid for? And what is that going to bring that we don’t currently have? I think the next step, as an authority, is to bring on a consultant and an architect in order to come up with a plan to move forward.”

Cedric Johnson, chairman of the Augusta-Richmond County Coliseum Authority, said he is extremely proud of the financial improvements that have been achieved over the past few years at the arena and the Bell Auditorium.

“The steps that we’ve made over the last two or three years have basically shown that the arena could financially do a whole lot better than it was doing in the past,” Johnson said. “People had to see that we were serious about running it as a business and trying to be profitable. Most arenas are not profitable, but, in the past, we were losing a whole lot more money than we should have been.”

The second required step was to bring in more diverse acts to attract a wider audience, Johnson said.

“Spectra has done an excellent job of bringing in great acts,” Johnson said. “Also, one of the things that has been said was people in Augusta wouldn’t pay the higher dollars for concerts. That has been proven not to be true. We have had some \$100 shows that have been sold out. So the people of Augusta and the CSRA have shown that they want to have good entertainment and they are willing to pay for good entertainment.”

Now that Spectra and the coliseum authority have proved those myths to be incorrect, Johnson believes it is time to seriously talk about a new arena.

“I think the figure was somewhere around \$20 million that we would have to put into the current arena. And we are not talking about any major renovations.”

— Cedric Johnson

“To try to keep it up and going, we are going to have to put millions and millions of dollars in the current arena over the next 10 years,” Johnson said. “I think the figure was somewhere around \$20 million that we would have to put into the current arena. And we are not talking about any major renovations. Everything is old and everything is wearing out. That would just keep the doors open.”

Johnson insists that Augusta deserves better.

“We believe the people in the CSRA deserve a first-class entertainment complex and that’s what we want to do,” he said. “We have shown that we can bring in entertainment and we have shown that people will come and will pay for it, but now we want to give them a venue that is first-class so that we can bring some better acts and some different shows so we can improve the quality of life, in terms of entertainment, in this region.”

Later this year, Johnson said he hopes that the authority will be able to really begin “vetting its case to the community” on the importance of building a new arena.

“You are looking at an arena that is more than 30 years old. We have to face that fact,” Johnson said. “Everything these days is more modernized and we are just not there.”

But Augusta can draw much better shows to the region, if the community gets behind building a state-of-the-art facility, Usry said.

“There are two really crucial aspects to this: We have got to put it in the right location and we can’t cut any corners,” Usry said. “If we say, ‘We can only spend this much money, but we need to spend this much,’ it won’t work. We need to stick to our guns and build what needs to be built. Otherwise, we will regret it forever.”