



[The Morning Call](#)

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PPL CENTER TO HOST NCAA REGIONALS

PPL Center, home of the Lehigh Valley Phantoms, has already hosted a number of big-name concerts and high-profile events, such as the 2017 AHL All-Star Classic.

Now they can add an NCAA tournament to the list.

The downtown Allentown arena, which has a standing-room capacity of over 9,000, will host the 2018 and 2019 NCAA Division I Men's Hockey Midwest Regionals with Penn State University serving as the host institution. The 2018 regionals will be held the weekend of March 23-25 and the 2019 regionals will take place March 29-31.

Exact schedules for the regionals will be announced at a later time.

The Request for Proposals for the next five years of regional sites were sent out by the NCAA about a year ago. That's when PPL Center officials got in contact with Penn State and began discussing the possibility of putting together a bid.

With the success the Phantoms had, and at the time an AHL All-Star Classic on the horizon, PPL General Manager Gunnar Fox believed it made sense to throw their hat in the ring. Penn State had hosted other NCAA championships in the past and were able to greatly assist PPL Center in the bid, which was submitted in August.

Fox, who isn't surprised by how many notable events are coming to PPL Center over a rather short period of time, said they never had specific events in mind when the building opened in 2014. They have, however, been strategic in their planning. Fox said they're always trying to use the success of one event, or team in the Phantoms' case, to attract other opportunities. The NCAA men's hockey regional was no different.

"I think it was more taking advantage of opportunities that present themselves and when they present themselves," Fox said. "And for us it's really about trying to offer a diverse lineup of events, even though we do have hockey here, this is something a little bit different. It's a different process, it's a chance to see different players and frankly a chance to showcase the PPL Center and the Phantoms' brand. It's a chance to showcase the Lehigh Valley and downtown Allentown, specifically."

One hurdle for booking PPL Center is scheduling. With Jim and Rob Brooks not only owners of the Phantoms, but also the master lease holders at PPL Center, it makes things a little easier. The Phantoms take up a minimum of 38 dates between October and April each year. This year, a playoff berth means there are even more dates locked up. On top of that there's indoor auto racing, concerts, WWE wrestling and Monster Jam, just to name a few.

An event as big as the NCAA men's hockey tournament made it easy for the Brooks brothers and PPL Center to work together and make sure the Phantoms' AHL schedule cooperates.

"This is one of those cases where we decided that we're going to plan around this weekend," Fox said. "It's just a matter of planning and making sure that the rest of the calendar, you leave enough space in different areas to make sure that you can make everything work."

While PPL Center has been successful in a wide range of events, the strength of support for hockey not only in this market, but also in the building, played a large role in a successful bid. Fox said that's something that is very important for national organizations like the NCAA.

This will be the first men's hockey regional ever to take place in Pennsylvania, although Pittsburgh (2013) and Philadelphia (2014) have previously hosted the Frozen Four, the semifinals and finals of the NCAA Division I Men's Ice Hockey Championships.

Four NCAA teams will take place in each of the four regional sites with next year's winners advancing to the Frozen Four in St. Paul, Minn. and the 2019 winners moving on to the Frozen Four in Buffalo, N.Y.

If Penn State qualifies for the tournament they are guaranteed to play in the Midwest Regional in Allentown.

Over the past four tournaments (since 2014) nine different cities have hosted an NCAA Men's Ice Hockey Regional including Cincinnati, Ohio (three times), Providence, R.I. (twice), Fargo, N.D. (twice), Manchester N.H. (twice), St. Paul, Minn. (twice), Worcester, Mass. (twice), Manchester, N.H. (twice), Albany, N.Y., South Bend, Ind. and Bridgeport, Conn.

NCAA men's hockey regionals are held in off-campus facilities but Penn State is still excited to serve as the host institution for the Midwest Regionals. Their women's team also received news that they'll be serving as an NCAA tournament host. The women's Frozen Four will be on-campus at the Pegula Ice Arena in 2022.

"Penn State prides itself on providing exceptional championship experiences for student-athletes," Penn State Assistant Athletic Director Michael Cross, who oversees the men's and women's hockey programs, said in a news release from the school. "It's an honor to have those efforts recognized with successful bids to host NCAA Championship events in our two newest sports and in two new, state-of-the-art facilities. The PPL Center will provide a fun tournament atmosphere for the NCAA Men's Hockey regionals in Allentown."

Fox wouldn't discuss specifics as far as the NCAA men's ice hockey regionals opening the door for PPL Center to feature other events but he said it helps them achieve their main objective.

"Every time you do an event it helps you to build upon what your goal is and our goal is to provide as many diverse entertainment options as we possibly can," Fox said. "While it is a huge announcement, it's also another piece of the pie that we want to continue to strive to bring that diverse lineup of events."