

January 30, 2013

## Arena Study Unveiled

By Jacob Fuller

After nearly five years of discussions, fundraising and bid evaluation, the city of Jackson finally has the results of a feasibility study for a new downtown arena.

In January 2012, the city hired Washington, D.C.-based Brailsford and Dunlavey to head a \$109,000 study to determine what a new arena would cost, where best to build it, what it would look like and what kind of economic impact it might have. The firm also manages arena and other construction projects.



*After years of talks and proposals, the city has a feasibility study of a new, 9,000-seat downtown arena.*

At the Jan. 27 special Jackson City Council meeting, Jackson-based Dale Partners and Brailsford and Dunlavey (programmanagers.com) presented the results of the study. They suggest the city build a \$115 million arena along Amite Street between Mill and Farish streets, directly behind F. Jones Corner and the proposed Farish Street Entertainment District.

"It's a very key and crucial location within the city," Dale Partners architect Charlie Alexander said. "The concept of the arena opening up onto Farish Street and basically feeding the activities that are going on Farish Street is a very exciting concept."

The proposed arena could hold between 9,000 and 12,000 people, depending on the event, with the possibility of future expansion for up to 15,000. Alexander presented artist renderings of the proposed arena to the Council, including area maps with the arena included and diagrams of the arena's interior. The arena could serve as a venue for multiple entertainment events, including sporting events, concerts, ice shows and others.

Mayor Harvey Johnson Jr. said at the meeting that state Department of Agriculture and Commerce Commissioner Cindy Hyde-Smith is trying to get funding from the state Legislature to renovate the Mississippi Coliseum, and that Jackson State University is working on plans for a new football stadium. "We look at this study as providing information that can be used by both of those other parties," Johnson said. "We may be able to come up with some solution to all of our concerns."

The city most likely will not be able to fund such a project on its own any time soon, Johnson said, but he still thinks the study was warranted and useful.

The consultants estimated that the construction project would generate \$106.4 million in economic activity, support 869 full-time jobs and pay \$597,000 in local taxes. After construction, they estimate the facility would produce \$19.7 million in economic impact per year, support 147 jobs and 14,500 night stays at local hotels annually.

Two council members, Margaret Barrett-Simon, Ward 7, and Charles Tillman, Ward 5, asked the consultants why they suggest an arena that is not much larger than the Mississippi Coliseum, which holds between 6,500 and 10,000, depending on the event. Ryan Conway, project manager for Brailsford and Dunlavey, said the metro area simply could not support a larger venue at this time, but that the possibility of population growth is why the company is proposing an arena with growth potential.

The Jackson Redevelopment Authority owns most of the land on the proposed site, which Conway said helps minimize the land acquisition the city would have to do.

Ben Allen and Downtown Jackson Partners presented the idea of a new downtown arena in 2008.

Early proposals were based largely on the Verizon Arena, an 18,000-seat venue located in Little Rock, Ark. Pulaski County provided most funding for it with a one-year, 1-cent sales tax and by pre-selling sky boxes and suites. The \$84 million arena received \$20 million from the state of Arkansas and \$20 million in private money. Verizon Arena was profitable six of its first 10 years of operation. The Arkansas Diamonds of the Indoor Football League left the venue for Allen, Texas, after the 2010 season.

The Jackson arena proposal passed to the Jackson Chamber of Commerce, which set up a steering committee and hosted an "Arena Extravaganza" Nov. 16, 2010, to raise money for a feasibility study. The committee hoped to raise \$80,000 for the study, but collected less than \$60,000. Less than a month after the fundraiser, the Jackson Chamber handed the project over to the city.

Jackson put the arena on the back burner as it focused on other projects. In January 2012, the Jackson City Council voted to hire Brailsford and Dunlavey to head up the study, which also included looking at possible upgrades to Thalia Mara Hall. In August 2012, the consulting firm recommended between \$2.3 million and \$3 million in renovations to the old municipal theater, including new lighting, exterior signage, a marquee, new seating, air conditioning upgrades and renovated concession areas, none of which has been started.