

Hartford Courant.

Perez Enters NHL Scene

Mayor Says City Will Hire Consultant for Arena Study

August 31, 2006

By Jeffrey B. Cohen
COURANT STAFF WRITER

Mayor Eddie A. Perez's decision Wednesday to investigate the city's prospects for building a new NHL-ready arena is another step in what many see as long-shot attempt to bring major league hockey back to Hartford.

But the step, Perez and others said, sends an important message to legislators, the governor, potential team owners and the NHL itself that the city is ready to take control.

"This puts Hartford front and center on the question of, 'Can hockey work in Hartford, and what will it take to make it work?'" Perez said, acknowledging that any new arena would have to be built with hefty state and corporate financial support.

"But I want to settle the whole point about whether Hartford can answer the question itself. I think we can answer the question ourselves."

The significance of mayoral leadership shouldn't be underestimated, said Jeffrey Turner of Brailsford & Dunlavey, a sports facilities consulting firm that worked to build a new baseball park for the Washington Nationals.

"The mayor was a driving force and it really helped," Turner said. "He was the main point for the negotiations and really helped Major League Baseball feel comfortable dealing with Washington."

Perez Wednesday announced plans to hire a consultant to help him figure out whether a new arena for an NHL hockey team makes sense in Hartford, and he has asked those interested to get back to him by mid-October. No potential sites for an arena have been selected.

The mayor's move comes just weeks after a consultant for the state's Connecticut Development Authority - the quasi-state agency that has a lease on the Civic Center from the city through 2013 - completed a study of its own, telling it what many already knew: The existing building is not suited for major league sports.

The consultant also told the authority that any new arena would probably cost between \$300 million and \$400 million, not including site acquisition and parking.

House Speaker James Amann - a Milford Democrat who supports a new arena and says it is a priority for the next legislative session - welcomed the mayor's move, saying it gives the upcoming discussion some credibility.

"I need someone to step forward, and I think he's done that, to say, 'Hey, state of Connecticut, don't forget you're in our city still,'" Amann said.

Perez's study, Amann said, won't conflict with the state's pending request for proposals. "What I see is, we now have a two-pronged approach ... which gives us options, and options are good."

While the development authority's study focused in large part on the future of the Civic Center, Perez says his study will be more targeted toward building a new arena that would work for the NHL, possibly even the NBA. Armed with the results of the study, he will be in a better position to approach potential team owners and the NHL with confidence, he said.

"For us even to get the NHL's attention, you have to have the site and the ownership question and the partnership with clarity - so when you get the appointment, you don't waste the opportunity," he said.

The long-running discussion over bringing hockey back to Hartford kicked into a higher gear in late 2005, when developer Lawrence R. Gottesdiener announced he wanted to build a new arena and bring an NHL franchise to Hartford.

Gottesdiener, whose Northland Development Corp. has all but finished building the 262-unit apartment tower called Hartford 21 and has more than \$500 million invested in the city, has said he would buy a team and has pledged \$25 million toward a new arena.

"We're very pleased that the mayor is showing the leadership he is taking on this issue," said Northland spokesman Chuck Coursey.

Gottesdiener, along with Perez, traveled to Minnesota in April to visit the successful Minnesota Wild. Like Hartford, Minneapolis had - and lost - an NHL franchise; the Whalers left Hartford for North Carolina in 1997.

But Gottesdiener came up short in his first bid to buy a hockey team.

His effort to buy the Pittsburgh Penguins was stymied last month by fellow Hartford developer Sam Fingold - who has said he has no interest in bringing a hockey team to Hartford.

In late July, the Penguins selected Fingold and began negotiations to sell him the team for a reported \$175 million. But Wednesday, amid media reports out of Pittsburgh, Fingold acknowledged some trouble in the talks.

"We still want to buy the team, we're anxious to keep working on it, but there's some huge, fundamental business issues here," Fingold said. "The equity is always there for the right deal. If the deal's not right, the deal's not right. We're hoping we can get through this impasse and keep going."

Coursey declined to comment on the question of whether Gottesdiener would be next in line for negotiations on the ownership of the Penguins should the deal with Fingold fall apart.

Contact Jeffrey B. Cohen at jcohen@courant.com.