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City Gets Expert Blessing, Prepares to Back Bayside Arena

Portland Officials Quietly Hire a Local Public Relations Consultant to Explain the Plan's Benefits to the Public

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By Mark Shanahan, Staff Writer

City officials appear ready to publicly advocate for a new arena in Portland's Bayside neighborhood, now that an outside consultant has concluded the project makes good financial sense.

Officials say a report released Wednesday by Brailsford & Dunlavey of Washington, D.C., confirms that Portland would benefit greatly from a new facility for minor-league hockey, concerts and other events now held at the 22-year-old Cumberland County Civic Center.

The next task, they said, is to convince the community of the need to replace the civic center with a modern, 10,000-seat arena.

To that end, the city has quietly enlisted the services of Alan Caron, a one-time Democratic consultant whose company, Caron Communications, has devised and orchestrated several public-relations campaigns in Portland.

City Manager Robert B. Ganley said a communications specialist is needed to explain the Bayside redevelopment plan -- and particularly the arena concept -- to the public. Officials also are mindful that some residents and social-service providers do not favor building a new arena in the middle of Portland's social-service district.

"The feeling was that we needed somebody with experience who could pull all of this together and present it," Ganley said.

Caron has consulted on several successful campaigns in Portland, including the referendum on the city's gay-rights ordinance in 1992, and the bond issues for renovations at Merrill Auditorium and the city's three middle schools. Caron could be paid as much as \$ 10,000 by the city, Ganley said.

Proponents of a new sports-and- entertainment complex believe their case largely has been made by Brailsford & Dunlavey, the consultant hired after the Libra Foundation bought 6.6 acres in Bayside and then offered the land and money to the city for a new arena.

Libra, a charitable organization begun by the late Elizabeth Noyce and led now by the Portland attorney Owen Wells, is paying the consultant's \$ 110,000 fee.

Earlier this month, Christopher Dunlavey told city officials that Greater Portland is a small market for a 10,000-seat arena in comparison with other cities with new arenas. He said the size of the market raised "red flags" about the viability of a larger arena in Portland.

The report released Wednesday looked not only at the market, but also at the site for a new arena, and the cost.

While he still says Greater Portland is relatively small for a 10,000-seat arena, Dunlavey said southern Maine's demographics are "adequate" to support such a facility.

He said the question really is what the city is willing to spend, and what it expects in return. Just to increase the existing civic center's capacity by 2,000 seats, and meet the requirements of the federal Americans With Disabilities Act, the city likely would pay \$ 30 million, he said.

By comparison, a new arena would cost \$ 46 million, Dunlavey said, of which \$ 20 million could come from Libra or other private sources.

"What is the wisest investment?" Dunlavey asked.

The consultant's financial analysis compares a new arena with an expanded civic center, and concludes that the new facility would be better attended and more profitable.

For example, the report says a new arena would generate:

\$ 782,000 a year from concessions, compared with \$ 459,814 at the civic center.

\$ 200,000 annually in advertising revenue, compared with \$ 37,948.

\$ 231,000 annually from premium seating, compared with \$ 68,544.

A renovated civic center also would be profitable in the first few years, Dunlavey said, but expenses quickly would outstrip income at an older facility.

Mark Swann, executive director of the Preble Street Resource Center, said he is puzzled by projections of increased attendance. He said the Portland Pirates hockey team already has a hard time filling seats in the 6,746-seat civic center.

"Where are these assumptions coming from?" Swann said.

Dunlavey said the projection of 753,000 people for all events in 2001-- compared with 460,161 last year at the civic center -- is based on a survey of 4,000 southern Maine residents.

He said more than 50 percent of the 492 respondents indicated they would attend at least one more concert or family show a year at a new facility, and 70 percent would attend another sporting event.

Dunlavey said the projection also assumes an increase in people drawn by the "ambiance and atmosphere" of a new arena.

The consultant has said the boundaries of the new building would be Oxford and Kennebec streets, and Chestnut and Elm streets. It would eliminate 13 buildings and a total of 18 apartments.

Brailsford & Dunlavey has concluded that it would be feasible to build the new arena without eliminating all housing or completely displacing the neighborhood's many social-service agencies.

Dunlavey said Wednesday that the arena would take up about 70,000 square feet of the 322,719 square feet now occupied by social-service agencies in Bayside.

Richard Aronson, the owner of Century Tire and a member of the Bayside Task Force, which is studying the arena idea, said the consultant's report is all the information he needs to promote the project publicly.

He said the time has come for city officials to do the same. "We have the information we were seeking," he said.

Likewise, John Carroll, chairman of the Portland Planning Board, said a "strong but subtle case" now can be made for building a new arena.

"The city has been offered something that's not a white elephant. It's a good, strong alternative to what we have," said Carroll. "Just because the civic center is not falling down doesn't mean it's adequate."

The task of communicating that, and trying to build consensus among Bayside's social-service providers and residents, will fall to the city's new public-relations consultant.

Caron said he will not try to shape public opinion, but rather facilitate a public discussion about the arena proposal.

"I see my role more as a mediator and a facilitator, getting people to talk to people," Caron said. "I'm there to help all the different sides work through this process."

Rarely has Caron been on the losing side in a political campaign or a public policy debate. In addition to his involvement in the gay-rights effort in Portland, he successfully opposed widening the Maine Turnpike in 1991.

Caron's appointment was not approved by the City Council or even announced to the Bayside Task Force. That clearly irked some members of the group Wednesday.

"That's the first I've heard of it," said Swann, of the Preble Street Resource Center. "I'm surprised that we've hired someone to implement a communications strategy when we don't know what we're communicating yet."