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Portland May Lack Basics for Big Arena

**A Study Questions Whether the Area Can Support a 10,000-Seat Facility
and Finds a Lack of Interest in Luxury Boxes**

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By Mark Shanahan, Staff Writer

Greater Portland may not have enough people or money to support a new, 10,000-seat sports arena.

That is the preliminary conclusion of a Washington, D.C., firm that is studying the feasibility and probable impact of a sports complex proposed for downtown Portland.

The firm, Brailsford & Dunlavey, has told city officials that the viability of a state-of-the-art arena is limited by Portland's size and lukewarm interest in luxury suites and other types of premium seating.

"We believe that our market analysis raises a few 'red flags' about the limits of the potential upsides of the market," wrote Christopher S. Dunlavey.

The firm spent several weeks evaluating Greater Portland as a market for the kinds of events that a 10,000-seat arena typically draws, and gauging corporate interest in buying premium seating. The findings, while not a surprise to most observers, show that several issues must be resolved before a sports complex is built downtown.

"It's my sense that there's a strong need for a new facility," said Godfrey Wood, president of the Greater Portland Chambers of Commerce. "But I guess that until we have all the information, I don't think we can say anything for sure."

Brailsford & Dunlavey is now studying the economics of the arena proposal, beyond the probable price of \$ 45 million. That report is due April 1.

Discussion of a new arena on the Portland peninsula started a year ago when the Libra Foundation announced it had bought nearly seven acres in the Bayside neighborhood and was offering it to the city, for free, as a site for an arena.

The foundation, a philanthropic group begun by the late Elizabeth Noyce, also offered millions to help build the facility to replace the 21-year-old Cumberland County Civic Center.

In the report submitted to the city last week, Dunlavey says the population of Greater Portland -- 255,500 -- is smaller than that of most other cities with new arenas.

Those cities include Grand Rapids, Mich., which has more than 1 million people and recently built a 12,000-seat arena; and Moline, Ill., which has 358,700 people and also built a 12,000-seat facility.

Because it has "a real-world ability to support minor league sports franchises" through attendance, Dunlavey says Portland can compensate for being a small market.

Tougher to overcome may be a lack of corporate interest in buying premium seating, such as luxury suites and sky boxes. Because it generates a lot of money, special seating is common in new arenas.

Dunlavey said just 15 percent of the businesses contacted expressed interest in buying special seats. That is low for a market of Portland's size, he said.

On the other hand, Dunlavey said, a high percentage of local businesses -- nearly 65 percent of those contacted -- expressed at least some interest in buying advertising space in a new arena.

The report concludes that a more modern facility, with better acoustics and concessions than those at the civic center, could attract additional events each year, but not enough "to argue in favor of a new arena."

Attempts to contact Dunlavey were unsuccessful Monday. City Manager Robert B. Ganley did not return phone calls. Owen Wells, president of the Libra Foundation, was out of the state Monday.

Those who have read the report have been impressed by its sober, straightforward tone, and its reliance on facts, not impressions.

"I'm greatly encouraged by the honesty of it," said Walston C. "Bud" Gallie, president of the Portland Taxpayers Association. "It seems to be entirely professional, and not indulging in fairy tales."

The consultant's report does not address several other issues, such as the potential effects of an arena on the Bayside neighborhood.

This week, a group that has studied that issue will formally announce its opposition to the arena proposal. The group says a sports complex in Bayside would force as many as 30 social service agencies to move.

"We have a lot of concern about the potential for disrupting the lives of clients," said Steve Hirshon, a Bayside resident who is a member of the group. "We've got a system that seems to work pretty well, and we want people to realize how difficult it would be to relocate, and how important those jobs are to the in-town Portland economy."