

bricks & mortar



16, 000 seats downtown | by sonya ewan

Albuquerque is poised to reap encouraging economic benefits from a Downtown event center sooner rather than later if urban dwellers can support this much-needed venue.

Mid-sized Downtown event centers are a growing trend, and Albuquerque is certainly in the running. Significant population growth and other "boomtown" indicators for the greater metropolitan area slot the city among other comparable cities as it transforms from a leisurely tumbleweed town into a contemporary urban mover and shaker. Recent high rankings for a variety of fun factors prove that we're on the national radar: No. 1 Fittest City, Men's Health, 2007; No. 4 Best Place to Live and Make Movies, MovieMaker, 2007; No. 1 Best Place for Business and Careers, Forbes, 2006.

Mid-sized venues, commonly attached to Downtown revitalization projects, are built to serve an increasing demand for readily accessible and cost-effective quality entertainment. Quite simply, you aren't a mid-sized town on the map unless you have a state-of-the-art events center that draws big-name concerts and professional sports team tenants.

So it's no surprise that Albuquerque's Downtown 2010 Sector Development Plan for revitalization contains a multi-purpose event center as a top priority objective.

The 16,000-seat event center proposal by ABQ Downtown Development (headed by Garfield Traub Development and including SMG Management) under negotiation with the city as of January 2007 would be ideal for attracting events that can't be accommodated by Rio Rancho's Santa Ana Star Center, an 8,000-seat capacity center. Nevertheless, the plan begs the question as to why Downtown is the chosen location. Brendan Falvey, a Downtown Albuquerque resident for the past 13 years, explains: "When you build a stadium, sports bars and restaurants follow. Even hotels, for the visiting team and its fans, are interested in locating nearby. It makes for a full evening. When I was in high school living on Long Island, we'd take the railroad to Penn Station at Madison Square Garden to see a concert. It's more exciting to see a venue right in the middle of the heart of the city. In Albuquerque, when you leave Tingley, Isotopes Park or the new

Scorpions Event Center, you just go straight home. There's nothing there."

Terri L. Cole, president and CEO of the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, elaborates: "The event center would help to create the critical mass needed in Downtown to support area restaurants and retail businesses as well as increase property tax revenues. A 2004 Economic Impact Analysis released by KPMG showed that an event center in Downtown Albuquerque could spur \$994 million in economic benefits over the course of the next 30 years and \$30 million in tax revenue to the City of Albuquerque and State of New Mexico. Finally, a critical mass provides for a gathering place for residents in the region."

Looking to similar cities for success stories we note the Ford Center in Oklahoma City, which opened its doors in June, 2002. As part of a downtown revitalization plan known as the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS), was built on the east end of downtown walking distance within the Bricktown entertainment district and near the convention center.

"The Ford Center has experienced grand success in all ways," says general manager Gary Desjardins. "We sold out all our suites before we even opened, in addition to the naming rights and sponsorship." Another development included in MAPS and designed to piggy-back on the success of the event center, the Bricktown entertainment district in OKC has boomed. Says Desjardins, "Bricktown is the place to go on the night of an event. It's just hopping. The restaurants are full to capacity. The district also includes nightclubs, shops and four additional hotels, with one or two more in the works."

Approved by just 52% of the city's voting residents in 1993, MAPS initially evoked apprehension. Desjardins says, "A lot of people said we couldn't support an event center. They didn't think we had the revenue in this city to do it. But our first concert, the Eagles, sold out and then our second, Britney Spears, and then Cher and the Rolling Stones all sold out. That's 18,000 tickets, and some of them weren't cheap. No one knew we had that kind of disposable income in Oklahoma City."

According to Desjardins, there's a magic formula: "Our success is definitely due to the combination of three things: the facility management of SMG, the capacity and flexibility of the Ford Center, and the market response."

Last year Grand Rapids, Mich. celebrated the 10th anniversary of its Van Andel Arena, also managed by SMG and opened in October of 1996. The 12,000-plus seat, \$75 million event center includes arena football, minor-league basketball and AHL hockey teams as tenants. As predicted, the Downtown Entertainment District and neighborhoods have grown significantly over the last decade. Richard MacKiegan, general manager of the event center says, "Downtown property values have soared. There's obviously a direct benefit resulting from the arena. Not only are there more bars and restaurants in response to the demand created by both the event center and the new DeVos Place Convention Center (completed in 2005), but the quality of those establishments has improved. Plus, the success of the event center permitted the

acceptance—and even the possibility—of building the new convention center."

The ability to bid on major conventions is a welcome economic bonus. Tom Morton of SMG, general manager of the Albuquerque Convention Center, explains, "By location, the event center will complement the capabilities of the convention center. The event center enables the city to attract conventions that need a general assembly space of 8,000-10,000 and can use the convention center for their exhibits and meetings. From a meeting planner's perspective these two items go hand in hand if they are within walking distance from each other."

The event center and accompanying development could surely be the springboard to launch Albuquerque into the company of other hip cities with compelling Downtown destinations.

Of course there are significant issues the event center plan must resolve. Concerns about heavy traffic and insufficient parking are issues of high priority for resolution before operation. The Downtown event center proposal currently includes underground parking and sharing the Albuquerque Convention Center garage. The proposed site would also utilize infrastructure and access features, sitting in close proximity to the I-25/I-40 junction and the Alvarado Transportation Center. And this is key: Remember the smashing success of Rail Runner usage during the 2006 Balloon Fiesta and Bernalillo Wine Festival? Passenger numbers showed that once traffic is intolerable, people give public transportation a try (and not a moment sooner). With tracks at the edge of Downtown and a Rail Runner stop already in place, it's easy to imagine folks using the train to attend events from as far as Bernalillo and the South Valley. As Falvey points out, "People who are against it have never experienced a Downtown event destination.

All they imagine is the hassle for parking, or having to pay for parking. Also, with the train and Rapid Ride, the city could coordinate park-and-ride services (like most big cities) that surge pre/post-game. If you don't like the traffic, come early and do something Downtown before the game."

Both MacKiegan and Desjardins say their cities were careful to address public perceptions of safety and parking in their cities. "OKC made it a priority to educate the public about parking availability and the option of the rubber-tire trolley that circles the Downtown area," says Desjardins. "We definitely addressed the perception of safety and access. We took a very proactive approach, hiring more police

going to get to the point of 1 million people. At 1 million people, there's going to be a major-league sports team drawn to the city. I would say within the next five years, they'll strongly be looking at us. What you have to do, if you're going to build something, is make sure you build it big enough for the population of the future," she says. It is notable that Albuquerque was a consideration the minds of the NFL Saints and NHL Penguins teams. Build it, and they will eventually come.

It's all about timing, isn't it? After the disappointment Albuquerque residents suffered, watching a new event center rise on the far edge

to patrol during events, to enable the public to gain that necessary comfort level," says MacKiegan. "Also, without the event center, people didn't think they had a reason to go Downtown. But the event center brings in a big concert and people want to see it. Once they've been there once, they know what exit to take and how to find the arena and where to park Downtown. While they're there, they discover the bars and restaurants. In the future, people know there are other reasons to go Downtown, and they go again because it's familiar. There just has to be that initial exposure so people get comfortable with navigating Downtown."

Until the population grows to support two venues, the Santa Ana and Downtown arenas could be in competition. Doug Frank, former owner of the New Mexico Scorpions, cautions, "No study has indicated the economic viability of two such facilities," but local author and realtor Cheryl Gorder is optimistic. "Here's my prediction: With the growth that's happening, Albuquerque is

of Rio Rancho, enthusiasm for an event center to call their own ought to flow like the Rio Grande in monsoon season. By the time the drought comes around and the novelty itself isn't a draw, there could be a sufficient increase in population to support it. Hungry after the latest concert or sports event, folks will patronize familiar restaurants and spectators from around the state will fall into hotel beds—all in walking distance. Falvey's thinking is: "Neighborhood instead of sagebrush development, secondary private ventures, higher-profile events, better access by public transportation, lower DWI stats, more city revenue from local businesses and out-of-state visitors.... I'm definitely for an event center Downtown." The event center and accompanying development could surely be the springboard to launch Albuquerque into the company of other hip cities with compelling Downtown destinations.