

An Exhibition Center for The Fox Cities Now: A Prospectus Offered by Walter Rugland

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In the aftermath of the December 2 report-out of the CCCC as reported in the Post Crescent and heard in sound bites from the TV reports, and the absence, to this point, of a groundswell of the elected leadership, it is clear that a comprehensive, committed, privately led initiative to complete Appleton's convention center capabilities is needed to drive the project forward.

When I undertook the CCCC assignment in April, I believed our community was serious about the possibility and recognized that this was a good time for moving forward. In working with the task force members who generously gave of their time and expertise, I found that we were resolving open issues and allowing for timely decisions. My assumption from the outset was that unless we found fault with the direction as set out in the City Comprehensive Plan document and supported by the feasibility study available to us, the effort would move forward.

And so it should.

In order to help Mayor Tim Hanna overcome more than 20 years of inertia on the possibility of a fully capable convention center for Appleton, and to help Appleton's Common Council and all governmental bodies associated with the success of the project understand the financial investment/return connected, my conclusion is that if we (a community "we") want to take advantage of the financial opportunity presented in the next 18 months, the private sector must take the lead on the initiative and facilitate the participation of local communities.

To accomplish this, a Fox Cities Exhibition Center, Inc., (FCEC) not-for-profit must be established to undertake the construction of an Exhibition Center as outlined in the CCCC Report for opening no later than March 2015.

The location proposed is consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan. The CCCC Report details the components of the task and the open issues that need resolution and implementation. It would be for the FCEC to make it happen. It would be my intent to hire the Boldt Company and Zeidler Partnership (architects of the FCPAC).

Here follows a proposed agenda for FCEC:

1. Assemble a coordinating group to discuss a plan using this document as a starting point.
2. Select a leadership structure for the group. Define a detailed timeline that will enable the target date to be met. Allow for modification, but not more than a delay of six months.
3. Legally constitute a not-for-profit entity and file appropriate papers. Purpose of the corp. would be to plan, build, and own an Exhibition Center as described in the CCCC Report of Dec 1. Obtain pro bono legal assistance in this effort including filing for 501c-3 status.
4. Inform the Mayor and the Common Council that the coordinating group has been formed and that it will move the Exhibition Center proposal forward. As indicated in the Report, City involvement will be eventually requested and the request delegated by Council to ARA for further development. Confirm the appropriateness to expect support from City administration similar to that that would be provided to any economic development initiative of the size and scope being discussed.
5. Obtain access to funds to bring forward some initial conceptual designs and cost estimates. Get together with Boldt and get the work done.

6. Inform the Radisson owners that the FCEC will be working on the proposal and that we have assumed the City will not be involved in any long term financial negotiations (per the Mayor's statements). Ask for a time for a face-to-face meeting to discuss partnership possibilities. My expectation is that the Radisson will accept the long term operating risk.
7. Establish a team to work on the bonding issue. Discuss with CVB leadership and joined with the Radisson, work with the other hotels. Determine the process for actual implementation and select bond advisors. Agree on the room tax structure: 3% throughout or a skewed amount heavy toward Appleton, Grand Chute, and perhaps Kimberly. Determine a calendar and plan for obtaining room tax approval and putting in place the necessary admin stuff.
8. FCEC will work on the site issues with the County. We need to focus on development of a partnership approach to the issues the County administration thinks it faces in terms of parking and expansion space. A joint FCEC/County team needs to address all the issues. No final decisions can be made until there is a firm understanding of room tax expectations and hotel partnership risk taking, but the ground work should be in place early on.
9. Mount a public information effort that includes a maintained web site and a concentrated effort to share updates as well as discuss progress in established forums.