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EDITORIAL



Arena District draws urban-planning fans

Once a scar on the city, old Pen site is point of pride

The Arena District provides, for many visitors, their first impression of Columbus; it attracts people from the nearby Greater Columbus Convention Center, as well from Nationwide Arena and Huntington Park.

That it makes such a good impression is apparent in the fact that other cities are turning to this urban development as a blueprint for their own projects, hoping to replicate its success.

Arena District developer Nationwide Realty Investors says that officials from many cities, including Pittsburgh, Milwaukee and Sacramento, Calif., have come to meet with them and see firsthand what it is that makes the mixed-use area work. One key feature is that it's not only restaurants and bars that do well in the district; office space, hotel rooms and

apartments in the area also command a premium, adding vitality and revenue streams.

This type of bustling urban neighborhood is what Milwaukee hopes to create as it builds a new downtown area.

"We're not just trying to build a home for the Milwaukee Bucks but create a 365-day attraction for Wisconsin residents that will help revitalize downtown Milwaukee," Milwaukee Bucks President Peter Feigin told *The Dispatch*.

"The Arena District has effectively accomplished what the city hoped for in the 1990s—a link between the urban core and Ohio State University," said Mark Rosentraub, professor of sport management at the University of Michigan.

Surely a newcomer today would never guess that the area now occupied by the Arena District was an urban dead zone

a few decades ago. After being closed in 1984, the old Ohio Penitentiary, located on the southwest portion of what is now the Arena District, sat idle and crumbling for more than a dozen years.

It became a hazardous eyesore—a wall collapsed onto a street, cars were flattened—sandwiched between Downtown and the then-rough part of town known as the Short North (another area that has since undergone a dramatic transformation).

This underutilized corner of Downtown began changing in the late 1990s, as the city acquired the old Ohio Pen from the state and demolition cleared the way for Nationwide Arena.

The late Mayor Dana G. Rinehart once called the old penitentiary, which housed the worst of society, “a monument to many thousands of mistakes.” Today, it’s an example of getting it right.

One key to the Arena District’s success is that it continues to evolve and grow; it has surpassed \$1 billion in investment, mostly from private sources.

The addition of Huntington Park in 2009, which moved the home of the Columbus Clippers to Downtown, brought another important anchor to the area, supporting district

businesses during the summer when the Columbus Blue Jackets aren’t playing.

Today, Nationwide, along with another developer, is planning to develop the 25-acre site at the western edge of the Arena District originally was targeted as the site for Hollywood Casino Columbus. The Pen West project would add more office space and residences close to the Scioto River.

Residents often compare Columbus with other places, debating how the city stacks up against its peers. It’s a point of pride to know that the Arena District is viewed with envy by other cities, and to know that it continues to enhance the vitality and quality of life in Columbus’ urban core. ■

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