

New Arena offers peek into the future

Nationwide's chief overseer say the Blue Jackets' brick-and-glass palace will be a hit and a good fit downtown.

By Michael Arace
SPORTS REPORTER

Brian Ellis has a title as heavy as a bank vault. He is president and chief executive officer of Nationwide Realty Investors Ltd., the developmental subsidiary of Nationwide Insurance. Say that five times fast.

If Ellis' title has 179 syllables, his job description does not. He takes the gobs of money that the actuarials generate, invests in low-risk building projects and makes those gobs grow. It's not exactly a laugh-riot. Indeed, there must be times when funding an exurban supermall or developing an office park is about as gratifying as the public side of the insurance business—which is, of course, gambling on death with short odds and house money.

But this is not one of those times.

No, no, no, it is not.

Not by an actuarial long shot.

These are heady days for Ellis, 37, a Columbus native.

At this early stage of his life and professional career, he may be reaching his zenith of importance, both to his hometown and his company.

He is overseeing the construc-

tion of Nationwide Arena, future home of the NHL Columbus Blue Jackets, and the 95-acre district that will surround the building.

He is presiding over the job that could transform a once-nondescript urban parcel, highlighted by a penitentiary, into a soaring vision of the future, highlighted by a major-league sports team.

He has never had a project like this, and he'll probably not have one like it ever again.

Imagine that, peaking at 37. "I have no comment on that," Ellis said with a laugh.

He was standing on the main concourse of the arena, littered with the debris of sawed concrete and soldered pipes, and he was bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. He was giving The Dispatch a tour of the site and he couldn't say enough about the uniqueness of the place and the stamp it will leave on the city. This was Friday evening. Ellis couldn't stop smiling.

He has conducted a million of these tours throughout the construction, but he still manages to bounce up and down on his feet. He still manages to grin. He's still stoked every time he

puts on his white hard hat and comes into this place. It's true.

Unless he Trumps himself, this will be his professional piece de resistance. Right here.

There are rich men, pillars of the community, who made all of this happen—who brought the NHL, committed to building the arena, brainstormed about developing the area that will grow around it—but Ellis will have fingerprints all over the place, too.

That's pretty cool.

Making his mark

"I know this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to be involved in something like this," he said. "Not just because of its size, but because of the importance this place, this area, will have in this city. We (Nationwide) have been involved in a lot of multimillion dollar projects all over the place—but to do something like this in our town...that gets me geeked up."

Ellis paused. Then, he said, "Did I say 'geeked up?' Better make that 'very excited.'"

Hey, he works for an insurance company. "Geeked up" isn't acceptable. But that's what he is. And why not?

Anyone who has been in myr-

riad arenas all over the United States would be impressed with Nationwide, too.

The arena isn't a gift. The Blue Jackets, which will control revenues from the building, will have to pay a lease to Nationwide over 25 years. The lease is not public fodder but is probably somewhere in the range of \$ 2.5 million to \$ 3.5 million annually, judging by the deals arranged by other NHL teams.

Nationwide—as well as The Dispatch Printing Company, which has a 10 percent cut of the team, the arena and the surrounding development—will bank on Big Picture. In the plans are 1.3 million square feet of office space, 350-unit apartment complex, as many as six parking garages—and a park.

The scope is huge.

Most of the street-surface development will key on retail shops, restaurants and other forms of entertainment space. The Blue Jackets are financing a practice facility that will include a restaurant.

Ellis said there is a master plan for the 95 acres, but the "development plan remains fluid." He added that demand for office and retail space in the area started strong and has not waned.

"We got involved, first and foremost, to realize the Blue Jackets and be a major-league sports city," Ellis said. "No. 2, we thought the arena could be a catalyst for Downtown development. And it has, absolutely. I'm completely comfortable in saying that. The demand to be a part of all of this has been as high as one could have hoped."

He was bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. He loves touring this place.

In the landscape of modern-day, indoor-arena facilities, this place is unique.

The roof is on and most of the soaring columns and huge walls are in place, but the building is far from finished. The lower-bowl seats have yet to be installed. They haven't cranked up the heat for winter work.

But the shape and feeling are there, as are two dominant material features.

First, there are bricks. One million of them, give or take, will be set in mortar by the time the grand opening arrives next summer. The bricks pay homage to the brawny buildings that dominate most Midwestern cityscapes.

Second, there is the glass. Most of it has to be imagined, but there will be a lot of glass.

These two materials, brick and glass, not only serve to make the building a natural fit into the architectural arena of Columbus, they contribute directly to the design that will set this arena apart from any other that has been built in the modern era of superbowl. It is the combination of brick and glass that sucks the surroundings into the concourses and the very rink itself. And vice versa.

A room with a view

In today's world of vagabond millionaire franchise owners who gouge taxpayers to build revenue-enhancing, sterile arenas that put luxury-box purchasers above the game, Ellis and Nationwide went a different route. They eschewed the big architects in the arena-design business and went with a small company that would cater to a want for a one-of-a-kind facility. They enlisted Heinlein&Strock, a breakaway faction of the Kansas City behemoth HOK.

And here came the brick and glass.

The brick makes the place ease into Columbus. The glass pushes the design to uniqueness.

Even from the street, one can scan the very guts of the building, all the activity, even the game itself. , the glass allows views—from every concourse on every level—of the outside.

Sitting in a seat in the bowl, the glass gives fans a sense of orientation. Huge eyebrow windows cut naturally into the roof line and present a view of the city's skyline.

The theme of orienting the viewer carries further into the design in that every level of the building—main concourse,

club, suite, upper concourse and even the press level—has not only views of the outside but of other levels. Balconies are cut every which way. All activity is connected.

"The most unique thing, to me, is the way the arena interacts with its entire environment," Ellis said. "It's the way everything opens up."

The concourses are wide. There is, in the words of Ellis, "every which way to get up and down," but the staircases have been constructed to entice their use. On the main concourse, there is an extra-wide area where a "marketplace" of different vendors will ply their trade from separated stands. The chief beer vendor will be Anheuser-Busch. The soda king will be Pepsi. They bought major sponsorships.

Party Towers, Garth!

Speaking of major-league money, there are two types of private suites—Founder's and Executive—and they are both plush.

Two towers—known as "Party Towers"—are being constructed in two corners on the west side. They are being rented for larger groups. Architecturally, the tow-

ers push the suites eastward for a clear view in any kind of concert setup.

Hockey, however, was the starting point in the building's design. The seats rise at a steep angle and, according to Ellis and Blue Jackets president/general manager Doug MacLean, there isn't a bad view in the house.

More than 10,000 season tickets, along with the added cost of personal seat licenses, have been sold. The PSLs range from \$2,750 to \$750. The season tickets range from \$2,850 to \$860. Individual seat costs are between \$60 and \$20 per game.

There are but a few of the 15 Founder's Suites and the 36 Executive Suites still available. Premium seats are sold out.

Anyone interested in peeking at a suite or viewing a promotional video can visit the Fan Preview Center at 77 E. Nationwide Boulevard, just down the street from the arena. Once you see a Founder's Suite, you might want to go back to school and study to be a president and CEO of a developmental subsidiary of a major insurance company. With such a title, you can fit right in with the HDTV, marble bar and leather seating.
