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CENTER REVIEW

Skating To Success

Nationwide Realty Investors' Arena District provides 24/7 buzz for downtown Columbus, Ohio.

—
Randall Shearin



Bringing major league hockey to Columbus, Ohio, has kept the new Nationwide Arena downtown hopping about 50 times this past year with pre-season and regular season games. And, who knows, the Blue Jackets might soon be an NHL playoff fixture.

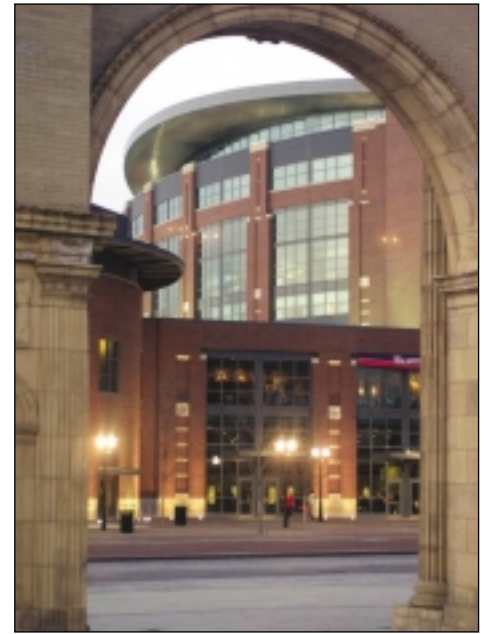
Even better, the Arena, a joint venture of Columbus-based Nationwide and Dispatch Printing Company, is busy another 100 nights a year with shows,

concerts and other sporting events. In all, Nationwide Realty Investors President Brian J. Ellis expects the Arena – on its own – to draw nearly 2 million people each year to Columbus's downtown.

Nationwide Realty Investors is the real estate arm of Nationwide, one of the largest diversified financial services and insurance providers in the United States, with \$120 billion in assets and more than 35,000 employees. Nationwide Realty

Investors is active throughout the United States with a diverse portfolio of office, retail, hotels, luxury apartments and developing land. Directly and through joint ventures, Nationwide Realty Investors controls more than \$900 million in real estate investments.

Now, Nationwide is well underway with its development of the high-energy, \$500-million Arena District, a spectacular mixed-use urban development. Features



soon to accommodate close to 1.5 million visitors per year, the currently expanding center has been ranked among the 25 Most Active Convention Centers in North America. As might be expected, plenty of hotels are close by.

“With its entertainment venues, office opportunities, ample parking, traffic, great restaurants and residences, the Arena

include more than 600,000-square feet of office space for downtown, retail, dining, residences, an urban-scaled cinema and a novel indoor-outdoor performance center which can be an intimate jazz cabaret one night, and a country concert amphitheater with seating under the stars, the next. The Arena District has become the hub of a burgeoning downtown Columbus, bringing business together with entertainment and residential; and integrating older neighborhoods with the construction of newer neighborhoods. A few steps away is the highly successful Columbus Convention Center. Expected

District defines high energy, which will complement and further stimulate all the exciting expansion in downtown Columbus,” says Ellis. “We have created a demand generator. Our office leasing is going extremely well and we continue to attract interest from highly successful local and national restaurants. We are now focusing our attention on attracting the same high quality retailers. The combination of office, entertainment, restaurant, retail and residents who savor this convenient, urban lifestyle is the formula for meaningful 24/7 use that all developers are striving for today.”

FIRST TO SCORE

At face-off time, Nationwide Realty Investors sought strong tenants to get the Arena District off to a rousing start-and to keep everyone well fed along the way. According to Ellis, the Arena District has already proved its salt for the project’s pioneer tenant: Buca Di Beppo Italian Restaurant.

“Buca Di Beppo opened in May of 1999. It is one of the nation’s best-reviewed and most successful restaurant concepts, but the downtown Columbus site has already claimed the Number 1 ranking. That’s impressive and indicates the strength of this market,” Ellis says.

Other restaurants that have since launched include: Gordon Biersch Brewery Restaurant, a German brew pub and restaurant; O’Shaughnessy’s Public House, a 299-capacity pub and casual dining establishment, whose owners are native to Columbus; Chipotle Mexican Grill, specializing in gourmet burritos; Starbucks Café; Blue Jackets Bistro, featuring casual bistro dining; and the Black & Blue, an upscale, French inspired, open kitchen dining experience.

Bounded by North High Street to the east, Neil Avenue to the west, Spring Street to the south and railroad tracks to

the north, land uses and attractions rising from The Arena District's 95 acres include:

- The Nationwide Arena, at 685,000 square feet, home of the NHL Columbus Blue Jackets (opened Fall 2000).
- As much as 1.5 million square feet of office space. Five buildings comprising approximately 600,000 square feet are already completed, with three more under construction. The buildings have been designed to provide density to the overall project and range from four to eight stories, with provision for high-end, first-level retail. Ellis expects to do exceptionally well with business workers, Arena District residents, as well as sports and entertainment patrons. While developments like the Arena District are meant to enhance and serve the Columbus metro area, Ellis adds that it will help attract conventions to an already busy Convention Center schedule and even draw a modest amount of tourism that didn't exist before.

"Now, Columbus has become a super Midwest weekend or two- or three-day getaway, much as Nashville or Lexington might be," Ellis says.

- Innovative entertainment venues, including the eight-screen Arena Grand Theatre with 1,700 seats (opening August 2001), the PromoWest Pavilion (opening

Fall 2001) and, Arena District Television or ADTV, the giant outdoor video screen unveiled this past New Year's Eve.

- Covered and surface parking totaling 15,000 spaces, apportioned to best serve all of the convention, entertainment, lodging and business activities of The Arena District and surrounding downtown, as well as intelligently accommodate both vehicular and pedestrian traffic.
- Abundant green space, including tree-lined Nationwide Boulevard, the Arena District's pedestrian-friendly "Main Street." McFerson Commons, a 3-acre park named after former Nationwide CEO Dimon McFerson, features the historic Union Station Arch; and outdoor plazas at the East and West Arena plazas.

Overall, the festival atmosphere is solidified by an intelligent architectural and space planning design. The Arena District's early industrial look, sprinkled with cutting edge design like the ADTV screen and plenty of open glass for nighttime lights serve as a welcome beacon, integrates well with its surroundings.

The Arena District's Master Plan was developed by Myers Schmalenberger of Columbus in collaboration with Sasaki and Associates of Boston.

MAJOR LEAGUE STATUS; SMALLER TOWN SMARTS

Columbus takes its place among a string of comfortably sized, progressive but modest Midwestern city successes, including the likes of Indianapolis, Indiana, and Nashville, Tennessee.

In some cases, prosperity is served by government and education, and Columbus is home to both Ohio's state government and the sprawling campus of The Ohio State University. However, as



pointed out in a recent Wall Street Journal report (February 22, 2001), Columbus is one of those cities that has found a comfortable, recession-resistant middle ground “between new and old economies.” Diversity is the key, with strong contributions from financial services, healthcare, retail, the food industry and wholesale trade. In fact, manufacturing accounts for only 11 percent of the city’s employment.

Like Tennessee, home turf for delivery giants FedEx and UPS, Columbus has proven an excellent location, and is far enough south to capitalize on the economic potential of shipping and distribution. Its once-mothballed Rickenbacker Air Force Base, 20 miles southeast of the city, has emerged as one of the nation’s leading express and distribution “megaplexes.” Renamed Rickenbacker International Airport, the 5,000-acre airfield is the world’s largest airport dedicated solely to cargo.

NATIONWIDE ARENA: NOT THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

The new NHL franchise, the Columbus Blue Jackets, does represent a coming of age and claim, in Midwestern style, to major league status, as it has for cities like Nashville and Indianapolis, but it is only one component of the project’s potent entertainment mix.

Opening this year, the Arena Grand Theatre, to be managed by the Drexel Theatre Group, with its multi-level design, balcony seating and Bistro Club level; and the PromoWest Pavilion, and all-weather, all-season, many-sized performance home are highly anticipated by Columbus’s movie, concert and club-goers.

“Certainly, it’s a highly competitive entertainment marketplace,” Ellis says, “And it’s been demonstrated in other areas that people will by-pass or hopscotch other venues for something as compelling and exciting as the Arena District.”



Designed to go “inside or outside,” 24,000-square-foot PromoWest Pavilion, developed by Nationwide Realty Investors and Columbus-based PromoWest Productions, will accommodate from 500 people to 2,500 people indoors. The pavilion’s stage can also be rotated, turning the venue into an outside stage and amphitheater, holding up to 4,000 people. Ellis expects 200 events

at the PromoWest Pavilion to draw as many as 250,000 people each year.

“The Pavilion is perfect to handle events or performances needing larger space than what a restaurant or club would offer, but more intimate than the Nationwide Arena. All forms of entertainment in the Arena District will be able to find their best stage and setting,” Ellis emphasizes. **SCB**