

Urban Land

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by STEVE WRIGHT

A privately funded sports arena anchors a new mixed-use development in downtown Columbus, Ohio.

At first glance, Columbus, Ohio, a sprawling, Midwestern capital city, seemed like one of the least likely candidates for a privately funded downtown sports arena surrounded by dozens of acres of dense urban development. The city always had been a college football town, so major league sports never seemed to have much of a chance of coming to Columbus, and hopes for a civic arena were dashed five times starting in 1978 when residents voted against the taxes required for funding it.

Downtown Columbus has its share of skyscrapers and cultural centers, but it also has its share of space-taking parking lots. High Street, the main north-south road through the downtown, abounds with surface lots and vacant storefronts. And since central Ohio has grown horizontally, not vertically, Columbus's downtown has tended to empty out after 6 p.m.—even though it is the location of nearly 100,000 jobs. But now, as the 21st century dawns, a young and growing Columbus has a privately funded arena, a National Hockey League (NHL) team, and a mixed-use devel-

opment district that could well be the envy of other metropolitan areas.

The NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets play in the rarest of milieus: a 100 percent privately funded arena—Nationwide Arena, which anchors a \$500 million, master-planned urban village. The city government will spend about \$44 million on roads, sewers, and other infrastructure for the new Arena District, a 95-acre urban village on the northern edge of downtown Columbus. Central Ohio politicians say they like the high amount of private-dollar development that requires relatively little public funding. Area planners reportedly love the grid pattern of streets, the mix of uses, the public park, the pedestrian orientation, the low-height buildings, and the throwback appeal of the Arena District.

Jim Schimmer, downtown development coordinator for Columbus's department of trade and development, praises the project on many levels. "I am certain that if the arena had been publicly funded, it would not have turned out to be the showcase civic building it is," he says. "The private sector can pay attention to

details, like scalloping the edges of brick pavers to give the sidewalks and streets a unique appearance. The public sector would have done concrete and not paid attention to the human-scale details incorporated into the district."

Schimmer also praises the private developers for building a major structure in less than two years. "The city of Columbus did what it is good at: land assemblage and public infrastructure improvements," he notes. "In the end, what a bargain for the taxpayers of Columbus: For about \$40 million of public improvements, we are leveraging \$500 million in private sector investment on formerly vacant, contaminated, disparaged land that included a former penitentiary site."

The Arena District is a site that was largely undeveloped and ignored, even though its northern edge is near a stable city neighborhood, its eastern edge touches the central business district, the southern edge is close to the riverfront, and its western edge abuts an industrial area primed for residential redevelopment.

"The arena has done something unheard of for the last 40 years—it puts more than

18,000 people at an event downtown past 10 o'clock in the evening," Schimmer points out. "This can only lead to even more economic spin-off throughout downtown than we already have seen. The arena and Arena District ensure that downtown Columbus's best years are in front of it." Adds Norman Booth, a professor and head of the landscape section at the Knowlton School of Architecture at Ohio State University, "Rather than sticking it in the middle of a parking lot, they integrated the arena into the urban fabric. It's become a destination district."

The official name, Nationwide Arena District, comes from the diversified insurance and financial services organization that has assets exceeding \$115 billion. Based in downtown Columbus, Nationwide developed the arena and the surrounding district. (The Columbus Dispatch Printing Company, the parent of the local daily newspaper, is a 10 percent investor in the project.)

The \$150 million, 685,000-square-foot facility, which opened to sell-out crowds in September, seats 18,500 for hockey games, up to 20,000 for concerts, and is expected to bring upward of 2 million people to downtown Columbus each year. Small portions of the Arena District were completed by the time the first puck dropped in October, the start of the NHL regular season. A restaurant opened in an existing building within the district, a practice rink attached to the western wall of the arena was up and running, and a low-rise office building attached to the arena's eastern edge was fully occupied. A large, grassy park that fanned out southward from the arena toward the Scioto River also was completed.

The three-acre park is named McFerson Commons to honor now-retired Nationwide chair Dimon R. McFerson, who spearheaded the plan for a privately funded arena shortly after a public vote to fund an arena failed in the spring of 1997. His plan kept Columbus in the hunt for an NHL franchise, its first franchise of the big-four major sports—hockey, basketball, football, and baseball. The NHL awarded a franchise shortly after it was assured that private dollars would fund the construction of an arena in Columbus in time for the 2000–2001 hockey season. When McFerson and other Nationwide executives came up with the idea for a privately funded arena, they approached the city of Columbus about acquiring the former Ohio Penitentiary site, which had acreage that they considered crucial to assembling the 95-acre area now known as the Arena District.

When completed after the next several years, the district will feature the following:

- The Nationwide Arena, complete with a \$7

million practice facility paid for by the team, a \$9 million arena office building paid for by Nationwide Realty Investors, and an \$11 million concessions area within the arena paid for by the concessionaires.

- A total of 1.3 million square feet of office space, all with retail space, restaurants, and other pedestrian-oriented uses on the ground floor.
- About 200,000 square feet of space for retail, restaurants, and entertainment, including a ten-screen theater seating 1,800.
- Approximately 300 residential units on the site of the former Ohio Penitentiary.
- A grid pattern of streets that connect to existing neighborhoods and a network of sidewalks designed to accommodate heavy foot traffic through the district.
- A public park anchored by a relocated Daniel Burnham–designed arch, an architectural feature that is the sole remnant of Columbus's historic Union Station, a train station demolished in the mid-1970s.
- An architectural standard for surrounding structures emphasizing dark-red brick and open, glassy structures—repeating the aesthetic of Nationwide Arena.

"Thanks to a significant number of structured parking garages, the preponderance of land is [being used for] vertical construction or parkland," notes Richard Sensenbrenner, a Columbus city council member. The Arena District development has been mostly a hometown effort, since Nationwide and its 10 percent partner both are established locals who teamed up to foot a \$500 million bill for building out the anchor arena plus offices, retail space, restaurants, residences, and nightclubs within the district. Other Columbus-based firms were involved in the district's master plan and as architect of record for the arena. In addition, the entire district was designed to complement a recently completed, city-sponsored plan that aims to redirect access and development of buildings and parkland to the area adjacent to the Scioto River.

Columbus has a healthy economy, but development has sprawled out, leaving the downtown behind. The city of about 670,000 covers nearly 200 square miles, whereas Boston with about 555,000, by comparison, covers less than 50 square miles. Many office buildings, shopping hubs, and entertainment centers are located in the outskirts, rather than in the center of the city. The goal is that the density and charm of the Arena District will help spur similar development in the rest of Columbus's downtown, in addition to reviving the long-neglected riverfront by orienting the southern edge of the Arena District

toward the Scioto River.

Ken Ferrell, manager of the downtown development office for Columbus's department of trade and development, has overseen many of the Arena District plans as they have been brought before the city's downtown commission for approval. "The architects and developers have resisted the temptation to go toward 'ego architecture' with the arena," says Ferrell. "Rather than building an architectural icon that may look good only if you're flying over it, but doesn't serve the pedestrian, they've built an arena that blends well with the district around it. It fits the urban fabric—it doesn't fight it."

With its attached office building, practice facility, and retail shops that face the main artery running through the district, Nationwide Arena sets the tone for the mixed-use development. From the beginning, Nationwide wanted movie theaters as part of the mix, but fitting ten screens into an urban template was not easy. The Arena Grand Theatre, expected to draw 750,000 people a year to the Arena District, should create daily, year-round activity there, which is especially good in the summer when the hockey team is not playing and concerts come outdoors. When it opens late this summer, the 40,000-square-foot cinema will feature amenities such as balconies and a café; it also will have its own dedicated parking structure so that theatergoers will not have to contend with the crowds generated by hockey games, concerts, and other arena events.

Another planning goal was to link the Arena District with the Columbus convention center, which is located a little more than a block east of the arena. The convention center has a symbiotic relationship with the Arena District; the arena, nightlife, and activities should help the convention center attract events, and its conventioners are expected to patronize the bars, restaurants, retail shops, and arena events. For a relatively small investment of city funds, the Arena District is expected to make a considerable economic impact. To date, the value of land around it is escalating, and clubs are opening to the north of it.

Currently, Columbus mayor Michael B. Coleman is focusing on mass transit to link the scattered downtown attractions and housing in an effort to lure more residents downtown all day long. "The Arena District will have national implications," notes the mayor. "We've turned a blight into a jewel."

Steve Wright, who covered the planning of the Arena District and the city's pursuit of a National Hockey League franchise for the Columbus Dispatch, is now a consultant in Hollywood, Florida, and writes frequently about growth, development, and travel.