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New sports arena gives downtown Toledo a trifecta



OKAY, it's time for a little tough love, Toledo.

If you were not among the 16,000 or so wide-eyed folks who gaped in awe at their new downtown sports arena last weekend, you need to get off your alibis. The party's starting without you.

There's an old expression that says it's better to be lucky than good. For once, Toledo is both. Lucky because the commitment to go forward with the arena came when it did, and the actual start of construction in earnest occurred in the fall of 2007. Given the state of the economy, the project would have stalled and probably died — after years of talk — had there been any further delay.

Good because Toledo and Lucas County have achieved something few if any American metropolitan areas our size have accomplished. The county has found a way to build two spectacular public buildings, each architecturally special, in the span of 10 years or less — Fifth Third Field and the new Lucas County Arena. What other city — of any size, really — can say that, especially getting to the finish line in the teeth of a national recession?

Debt service? Lots of it. At \$105 million, the arena cost significantly more to build than Fifth Third Field. A roof will do that. But there's an encouraging track record — here: debt retirement at Fifth Third is \$3 million ahead of schedule eight years in, even with a warm-weather stadium that sits empty and idle from October to April. The new arena will be in use and generating revenue year-round.

“Yes, there's risk,” says county administrator Mike Beazley. “There always is. But the greater risk would have been to do nothing.”



Visitors get a glimpse of the new sports arena in downtown Toledo. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

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Add the nearby conference center to the mix and you have what Pat Zohn of Gateway Consultants and county commissioners describe as the “urban trifecta.”

There's no denying the energy and the synergy generated by having three major downtown entertainment attractions all owned by the county and all within a couple blocks of each other. Just as Fifth Third Field did, new businesses are already taking advantage of the opportunity the arena affords. Two are nearby restaurants, Sidelines and the Hat Trick. And now the old COSI has reopened with new life as the Imagination Station.

So I'm not here to argue location. I still feel, as do many people on the East Side, that the old Sports Arena site would have been an excellent place for the new one, but that ship has sailed. Even so, though we keep hearing that somehow, some day, the Marina District will make East Toledo whole again, it's fair to ask when?

Did I say architecturally special? The new arena, though it is plunked down in the middle of Superior Street, blends in exceptionally well with its neighborhood despite its size. Look at the arena and then look at the old Secor Hotel across Jefferson Avenue. Note the design similarities, including the layered look of rock and brick.

The building makes a strong statement about the people who conceived it. Sometimes, it's not enough to be an engineer. It helps to be an imagineer, too. Little touches here and there make the point.

There's the “green screen,” the outside mesh wall on the arena's southwest side, where Virginia Creeper vines will eventually climb and spread and transform the corner.

Rain water will be captured and stored for landscape irrigation, providing protection even against a four-month drought.

Inside, subtleties in design abound. Suspended signs in the concourse directing patrons to their seating sections look a lot like hockey sticks and skate blades.

Even the walls in the elevators are grooved to look like the marks that skates make in ice.

Overhead, at the Madison Street entrance, light fixtures that look like giant baby rattles slowly change color.

One visitor from Cleveland, Kathleen Cerveny, described the design approach as “elegance, with a touch of whimsy.” That just about says it.

I remember the joke about the old Sports Arena — that the circus couldn't fire a man out of a cannon because of the low ceiling. Except it wasn't a joke. Now the circus will have a place to fire its cannon — if it still does that kind of thing. The new arena even comes equipped with an “elephant door” in the back. It's actually called that, and it's a lot taller than your garage door.

And if you want to talk whimsy, let's talk Jimmy Buffett. Yes, you'll hear that noted merchant of tropical wisdom and good times at every Walleye hockey game. The team has adopted one of Buffett's signature songs, “Fins,” as its theme song. Maybe you don't know the song, or maybe you've never been to a Buffett concert. I've been to 23 of them and I know the drill when I hear “fins to the left ... fins to the right.” Just watch the Parrotheads around you and do what they do.

When I ponder all the excitement downtown Toledo has to offer, and the thousands of Toledoans who still won't go there, I'm reminded of that slogan in the seat-belt ads: What's holding you back?

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