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Mayor wants city to explore civic center renovations ; But the arena's trustees determined that major changes would be too costly and possibly structurally unsound.

KELLEY BOUCHARD Staff Writer. *Portland Press Herald* [Portland, Me] 02 Feb 2006: pp. A1.

Abstract (summary)

CIVIC CENTER DEBATE BUILDING A NEW civic center in Portland has been a contentious issue since 1999, when city officials declined a gift of land and \$20 million from the Libra Foundation to build a \$46 million, 10,000-seat arena in the Bayside neighborhood.... [Show all](#)

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CIVIC CENTER DEBATE BUILDING A NEW civic center in Portland has been a contentious issue since 1999, when city officials declined a gift of land and \$20 million from the Libra Foundation to build a \$46 million, 10,000-seat arena in the Bayside neighborhood. IN 2001, civic center trustees considered a \$30 million expansion and renovation plan that would have added 2,000 seats, improved concession areas and created 14 skyboxes. They also pondered a \$15 million plan that excluded extra seating. Instead, they decided to spend \$5 million on roof repairs and other minor improvements. WITHOUT A LARGER ARENA, civic center officials say newer venues, such as the 11,000-seat Verizon Wireless Arena in Manchester, N.H., draw concerts and other acts away from Portland.

Portland Mayor James Cohen wants the city to take an active role in planning the future of the Cumberland County Civic Center. The possibilities, he said, should include renovating the arena rather than building a new one elsewhere.

Cohen has scheduled a meeting later this month with several city, county and civic center officials to begin talking about the pros and cons of the 28-year-old building and its Spring Street location. The discussions, he said, will examine the reasons why major renovations or expansions have been discounted in the past.

"Some options have been considered and rejected in the past based on assumptions about what the city would or wouldn't accept," Cohen said Wednesday. "It seems to me the best alternative is to build a better civic center right where it is."

County and civic center officials say Cohen's interest is a welcome change from the city's usual limited or late-stage involvement in civic center issues. However, they say civic center trustees have made many well-founded decisions in recent years, including a determination that major changes to the 6,800-seat arena would be too expensive and possibly structurally unsound.

"A lot of this ground has been plowed," said Neal Pratt, chairman of the civic center trustees' long-range planning committee. "I'm all ears, but that building has long-range challenges that need to be considered."

Peter Crichton, county manager, said Cohen's desire to get involved meshes with the county commissioners' plan to look at various programs and functions of county government, including the future of the civic center.

While commissioners are elected to oversee county services, trustees are appointed to oversee the civic center.

Brian Petrovek, managing owner and chief executive officer of the Portland Pirates hockey team, which calls the civic center home, lauded Cohen's effort to improve the existing building.

"It's absolutely what we've felt from the beginning," Petrovek said. "It's not about additional seating. We need suites and club seats and better concessions and more bathrooms. Those are the things that are going to make our facility better long term for our fans."

Civic center officials have considered improving or moving the arena for several years, most recently when developer Joseph Boulos made a \$250 million proposal last year to build a new civic and convention center on a two-block site between Franklin Arterial and City Hall.

Boulos' plan fell through when he and civic center officials failed to win support from Gov. John Baldacci and legislators for a local-option sales tax to help fund the project.

In 2003, a blue-ribbon panel established by civic center trustees recommended building a new \$60 million arena at that location, which includes the Top of the Old Port parking lot and a building and parking lot owned by Blethen Maine Newspapers, publisher of the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram.

Pratt said the trustees continue to support that recommendation.

Cohen points to recent improvements to Boston's Fenway Park, including seating expansion, as a model for making the best of a perfectly good location. He said he wants to see what the city can do to overcome perceived problems with the current civic center.

"Maybe I'll be proven wrong," Cohen said, "but it makes sense to me."

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