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Civic center face-lift revisited ; With a new facility unlikely, an innovative architect will be paid \$175,000 to develop renovation ideas.

ELBERT AULL Staff Writer. *Portland Press Herald* [Portland, Me] 27 June 2007: pp. A1.

Abstract (summary)

County, city, Pirates and civic center representatives gathered for a summit on the arena in late October. The meeting came days after [Janet Marie Smith], lured by Pirates officials, presented a simple renovation sketch to arena trustees who had expressed... [Show all](#)

Full Text

Janet Marie Smith ushered in a new era of architecture at baseball stadiums with Camden Yards in Baltimore and shaped recent changes at Fenway Park in Boston.

Now parties with a stake in the Cumberland County Civic Center are paying her \$175,000 to see how she would renovate the arena, a building that she evaluated briefly last year.

"This effort is really about taking a step back and looking at the existing facility," said Portland City Councilor James Cohen, commenting on Tuesday's announcement.

Cohen is a member of the new task force of city, county, civic center and Portland Pirates officials who will try to chart the future of the 6,800-seat arena in downtown Portland.

The move is the latest development in what is now a decade-old effort to either upgrade or replace the 30-year-old facility, which is small compared with other entertainment venues of its kind.

It signals acceptance by civic center trustees that plans to build a new arena, resisted by lawmakers locally and in Augusta since the late 1990s, are no longer politically viable.

"If the political realities are such that it's virtually impossible to get a new facility, we want to pursue alternatives," said Neal Pratt, a trustee and task force spokesman.

The Legislature effectively killed the last drive for a new arena in Portland when it adjourned two years ago without voting on a proposed local-option tax that would have helped fund a \$250 million office, hotel and arena complex.

The new task force hired Smith to devise a plan to expand seating capacity, provide better access for the disabled and add amenities to better serve fans, athletes and entertainers.

Baltimore-based Struever Bros., Eccles & Rouse, her firm, also will study whether the arena is sound enough to warrant a phased renovation, task force members said.

County, city, Pirates and civic center representatives gathered for a summit on the arena in late October. The meeting came days after Smith, lured by Pirates officials, presented a simple renovation sketch to arena trustees who had expressed reservations about the cost of another study.

The four entities later agreed to form a task force on the arena's future and split the cost of Smith's \$175,000 contract. The task force has not committed to accepting her proposals.

Smith is known for designing Oriole Park at Camden Yards, the first of several new athletic facilities to incorporate a retro look, and for her work at Fenway Park.

Portland Pirates CEO Brian Petrovek said Smith has a reputation for finding ways to "open up" athletic facilities to make them more attractive, moving concession stands outdoors and working to incorporate surrounding neighborhoods in the game-day experience.

Petrovek, a task force member, said her style fits with marketing studies that show sports fans value things such as bathrooms, concession stands and a facility's appearance.

"It does not necessarily have to be a 10,000- to 12,000-seat facility that costs an enormous amount of money," he said.

Smith estimated in the earlier meeting with civic center trustees that it would cost \$35 million to \$40 million to renovate the facility. The price tag, about half the cost of a new facility, according to some estimates, raised questions about whether the job was worth the expense.

Task force members said they have asked for a renovation that could be completed in phases. Smith will present her findings in about three months.

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[Sidebar]

PAST PROPOSALS

1997: A report concludes that the existing civic center can be renovated and expanded for \$23 million.

1998: The Libra Foundation offers land in Bayside and \$20 million to help Portland build a new arena.

1999: The city declines the Libra Foundation's offer, saying it doesn't want to ask taxpayers to help finance the \$46 million proposal.

2000: A report by Heery International concludes that the civic center needs \$4 million in repairs, and could expand by 2,500 seats with new restrooms and a new faade for \$37 million.

2002: Trustees shelve plans to renovate the civic center, saying it is more prudent to build a new arena. Hugh Farrington, former CEO of Hannaford Bros., is chosen to lead an eight-member committee to determine the feasibility of building a new sports/entertainment complex.

2003: The committee recommends building a new and larger arena on a parking lot on Congress Street near City Hall, at a projected cost of \$50 million to \$60 million.

2005: The Lincoln Center office-hotel-arena complex proposed for the Congress Street lot dies after the Maine Legislature chooses not to support public financing.

2006: Janet Marie Smith, the architect who oversaw renovations at Fenway Park, proposes renovations that would cost \$35 million to \$40 million.

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Title	Civic center face-lift revisited ; With a new facility unlikely, an innovative architect will be paid \$175,000 to develop renovation ideas.; [FINAL Edition]
Authors	ELBERT AULL Staff Writer
Publication title	Portland Press Herald
Pages	A1
Number of pages	0
Publication year	2007
Publication Date	Jun 27, 2007
Year	2007
Dateline	Portland
Section	Front
Publisher	Portland Newspapers
Place of Publication	Portland, Me.
Country of publication	United States
Source type	Newspapers
Language of Publication	English
Document Type	NEWSPAPER