

## **BJCC plans go beyond dome**

*Frustrated officials seek to avoid losing business*

By Michael Tomberlin

BJCC officials, frustrated that the planned dome project has stalled, said Friday they are talking to developers about proceeding with other expansion proposals, including a 300-room luxury hotel and an entertainment complex.

The debate over the proposed multipurpose facility is delaying work that should be done now to avoid losing convention business, Jack Fields, executive director of the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex told area elected officials at a meeting Friday.

Though it was clearly a major topic, the word "dome" was not uttered during the 90-minute meeting at the Gardendale Civic Center, underscoring the controversial status of the proposal.

"We're talking about things that need to be done now," Fields told the officials.

The dome debate has dominated BJCC expansion talk. But Fields said BJCC officials learned Thursday that a convention they thought they had landed for next year is going to another city because of the lack of restaurants, entertainment venues and hotel rooms close to the BJCC.

Negotiations are in the works for a top-flight hotel within walking distance of the BJCC, according to Fields and Jim Smither, president of the Greater Birmingham Convention & Visitors Bureau, who joined Fields in Friday's presentation. Fields said a confidentiality agreement prevents him from disclosing the name of the hotel chain.

Talks are also taking place with Bayer Properties Inc. and two other development companies -- one out of state and one with local ties -- to bring restaurants and entertainment venues to two blocks the BJCC owns on Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard.

Fields said Bayer, the developer of The Summit retail center, had originally been tapped to develop the property in conjunction with the dome but now BJCC officials are pursuing the project on its own.

Fields and others at the meeting argued that the need for expanding the BJCC's convention and meeting space is reaching a critical point. Other cities in the state and across the Southeast are expanding their facilities and competing for the business Birmingham has been able to attract.

The solution, according to Fields, is to expand the facilities by up to 200,000 square feet. But going after a larger slice of the convention and meeting business will also require more hotel rooms around the BJCC, Smither said.

Of the 900 or so rooms within walking distance of the facility now, around 750 can be committed for those attending BJCC events. That number will drop once the Redmont Hotel converts half its rooms to condos.



Smither said the area needs 1,000 rooms that can be committed and really needs closer to 2,500.

Through 2010, events booked at the BJCC are expected to generate more than \$292.5 million in economic impact at a cost of slightly more than \$1 million to attract them, according to the Convention & Visitors Bureau.

### **Mayor 'optimistic'**

Meanwhile, elected officials at Friday's meeting said they believe a majority of the Jefferson County Commission will end up supporting the BJCC's expansion plans.

"I'm optimistic we will find common ground after the November elections," Birmingham Mayor Bernard Kincaid said.

Kincaid said he has spoken with current and future members of the commission to have them consider committing money to a BJCC expansion. The county's current \$10 million in annual funding to the BJCC expires in 2008. That annual contribution is needed for a bond issue to pay for the BJCC expansion project.

The city has pledged \$8.8 million annually to support an expansion or dome. Gov. Bob Riley has said the state would also pledge an undetermined amount if the city and county both supported it.

Kincaid said if the county's funds could be earmarked for expansion of the current facilities and the city and state's dollars be used for a multipurpose facility, such a deal might fly.

Rep. John Rogers, D-Birmingham, a long-time proponent of the dome, said even if the "d-word" wasn't used at Friday's meeting, he is still committed to building a multipurpose facility and will not push for an alternative.

"We're still on Plan A," he said. "They can call it a Quonset hut, a dome, an expansion or whatever they want to call it."

Rogers said he has a "bomb" he hasn't used yet in the dome debate. Asked to explain, he said there are things the county needs from its legislative delegation that could be hard to get without cooperation.

Rep. Priscilla Dunn, D-Bessemer, said she can't understand why BJCC expansion has been debated for so long without any action. "Why can we not do so?"

Sen. E.B. McClain, D-Midfield, expressed similar urgency. "Something has to be done and it has to be done now."

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