



# Major Addition

By Tom Schuman

## Downtown Arena Offers Promise

**W**hen Evansville was named the Indiana Chamber's Community of the Year three years ago, Mayor Jonathan Weinzapfel said, "Our downtown is our identity, the heart of the city." A failing downtown in any city, he added, "sends a perception that the rest of the community is failing."

Revitalization in the central city and throughout the community helped Evansville earn that 2006 recognition. The construction of a new downtown arena – and the related development opportunities – takes that effort to an entirely new level.

"This is the biggest project the community has taken on in a couple of generations," Weinzapfel offers. "It will transform the community in how we think of ourselves. We've got great things going on here; there's no reason we shouldn't be proud."

Residents of the third largest city in the state may sometimes feel they take a back seat to Indianapolis, but the mayor uses the state capital as a case study of the possibilities.

"Maybe Indianapolis is the best example of a community placing its public sports facilities in the downtown business district with the RCA Dome, Market Square Arena and its successors. There is no reason the arena cannot make a difference here, although obviously on a different scale," he contends.

Bob Jones is president and CEO of Old National Bank, which made a strong statement about its commitment to the community earlier this decade with development of its signature downtown headquarters building. He is a Cleveland native who witnessed the tremendous positive impact of three downtown sports facilities in that city. Jones is also familiar with growth that took place in Akron, Ohio, following the birth of a downtown baseball stadium.

Jobs and image are two reasons he is excited about the arena project.

"There's the economic development, the immediacy of jobs that will be created as we build the arena, and the development of permanent jobs as this spawns other economic development," Jones relays, adding that it will be easier for his company and others to attract and retain employees.

"This will send the signal that Evansville and the surrounding area is on the move, and it can be a real rallying point for the community to come together. It's a lynchpin moment for the city," he continues. "When we execute this properly and move forward, we'll attract entertainment and convention business. We'll send a great message that Evansville is alive and vibrant."

### Location, location, location

An arena site was announced in mid-July. Situated between Walnut and Main streets, it will be connected to The Centre (the city's convention and auditorium facility) and a renovated

Evansville's new downtown arena (exterior and interior renderings shown) will bring a hockey team and major events to the city. The location (map on Page 51) offers proximity to other important sites and presents additional economic development possibilities.

Executive Inn hotel that will be developed by Browning Investments and likely carry a national name (Hilton and Marriott have been mentioned as possibilities).

While completion is more than two years away (the \$95 million project is expected to be ready in late 2011), it has also taken great effort to reach this stage. The decision to replace 52-year-old Roberts Stadium pitted emotional attachment against financial reality. The eastside facility has hosted a wide variety of events throughout its history and serves as the home of the University of Evansville Purple Aces basketball team.

Once that initial hurdle was passed, a number of downtown sites were in play before the final selection was made. Increased downtown traffic and fear of parking challenges have been cited by opponents in the community. Project manager John Kish, who came to Evansville earlier this year after his most recent stint developing the new Indianapolis International Airport terminal, admits some simply are not fans of downtown.

Most people he speaks with are “either very excited or really don’t understand how it’s being paid for. And there are people where education is not the issue. They never come downtown and simply don’t believe it is worthwhile to spend any effort to improve downtown. One person said, ‘Downtown is dead. Stop trying to revive it; please just bury it.’” That is fortunately a strong minority opinion, proponents contend.

### Answering the critics

A shorter-than-regulation floor length and logistical difficulties in setting up for concerts and special events are among the challenges at Roberts. Outside studies indicated it would take \$17 million to keep the doors open or \$90 million to fully renovate the facility and make it competitive. To build new on the landlocked site would require an estimated \$60 million property tax increase.

Weinzapfel and Kish cite no general property taxes for the downtown arena as a major factor. Funding will come from the existing food and beverage tax, gaming revenues and receipts from a downtown Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district. The latter is available only for downtown capital projects, and neither the food and beverage nor gaming funds can be used for general city operating expenses – which city officials must explain when asked how an arena can be built at a time of other budget challenges.

“Unlike the private sector, this is a good time for government to build a project like this,” Weinzapfel explains. “The borrowing, the materials, the labor ... all the costs are



lower. And we’re going to put people to work (approximately 670 in the construction phase and more than 500 to run the arena and other nearby businesses).”

Among the other answers to downtown arena objections:

- **Traffic** – the mayor admits there are “issues” with downtown traffic, but that work had already begun to adjust signals, change more one-way streets to two-way and provide greater access from Riverside Drive into downtown
- **Parking** – according to Weinzapfel, several city garages and other outlets will provide 3,000 spaces within three blocks. The number is the same as what is available at Roberts Stadium. An awareness campaign of all the options will be necessary, he says
- **Safety** – city leaders say the arena will complement other downtown venues, bring more people into the central city and only enhance safety through the increased numbers

### Next on the agenda

Positive developments brought Kish to Evansville. The promise the arena brings has him ready to move forward.

“When I first became aware of the project and I came to

Evansville to see the potential impact it had for the community and the public, I was very excited. It was a coincidence – you needed a new facility and downtown needed something to bring people to it,” he offers.

“The Main Street area has great potential. There is a significant downtown loft population that surprised me,” Kish continues. “Adjoining the Main Street area, there are lands available for development. It will also stimulate properties



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## Evansville Arena

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further away from Main Street.”

Kish cites “maximizing impact” and “minimizing disruptions” as critical during the construction phase. That includes the unique hotel arrangement – demolishing part of the current Executive Inn (while the other portion remains open for business) and totally rebuilding the facade.

He notes that it is likely more difficult for the developer under this scenario than starting from scratch, “but it is going to save us \$15 million. If we waited to get that \$15 million, we would be waiting a long time. We’re going to have a new (250-room) convention center hotel (with the national brand). The days when a 470-room, full city block hotel is the right answer for a community of this size are long gone.”

While Kish has been on board since January, Weinzapfel has been involved since day one and necessarily, he says, spent a lot of time bringing people along over the last five years.

“You have to take a project like this slowly. The people of Evansville appreciate a good stew on the stove that simmers for several hours rather than popping open a can and putting it in the microwave.”

### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Project web site at [www.evansvillearenaproject.com](http://www.evansvillearenaproject.com)

Mayor Jonathan Weinzapfel at [www.evansvillegov.org](http://www.evansvillegov.org)