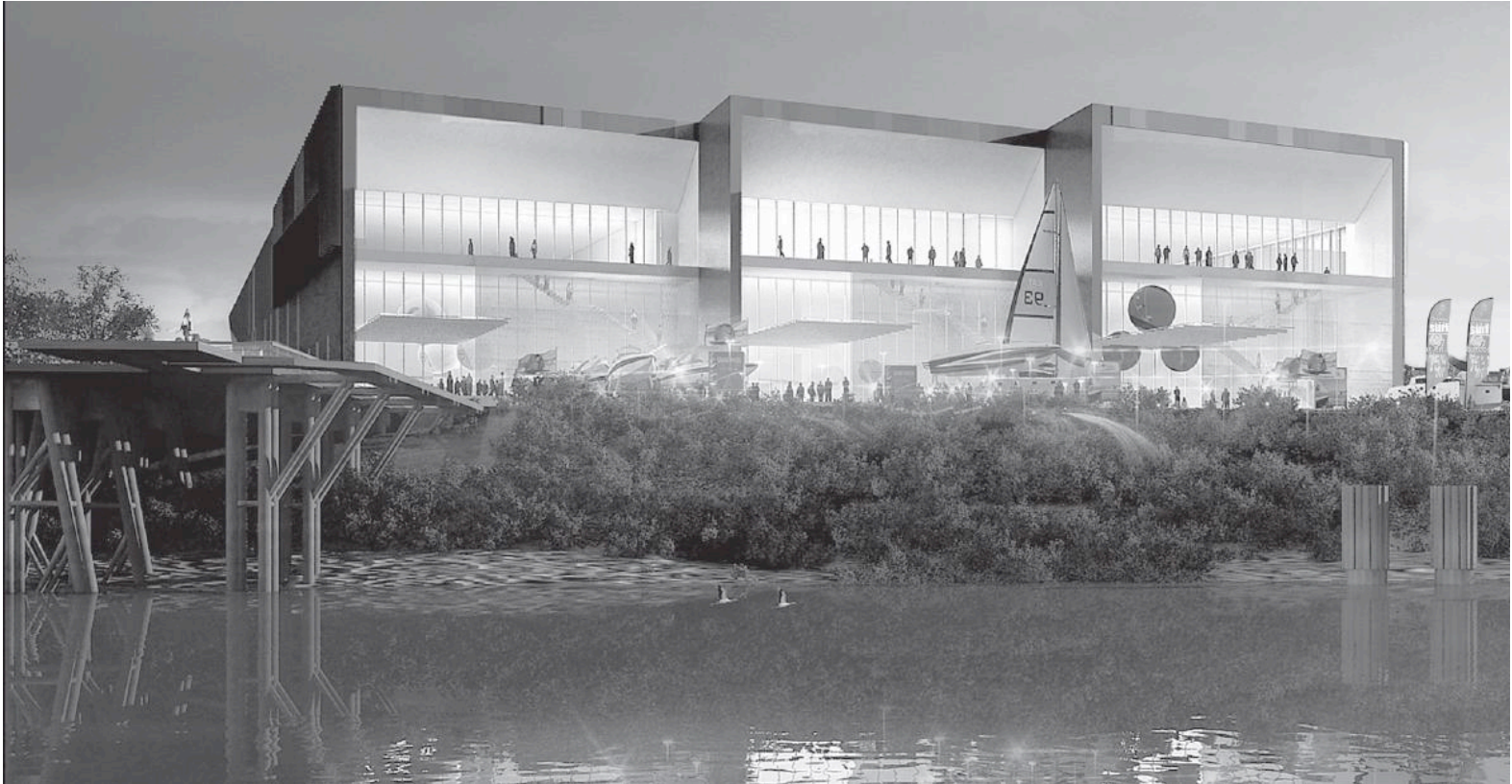


**Report on Public Forums
Downtown Convention Center**



**Public Life Foundation of Owensboro
and the
“We the People” Organization
August 31, 2011**

On July 27, 2011 Mayor Ron Payne requested that the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro (PLFO) and the “We the People” (WTP) organization facilitate three public forums on the proposed convention center. Mayor Payne requested that the forum focus on the following information:

1. The reasoning behind the size and design of this facility.
2. The total costs of the facility.
3. Where any additional funds would come from to complete the Center.
4. A reconciliation of the original Gateway plan to where we are today.

Mayor Payne called for a report on August 31 that captures “how the public feels” about the convention center project. He suggested two forums be held within the city and one forum outside the city limits in Daviess County.

In response to that request, PLFO and WTP worked with City Manager Bill Parrish and other city staff to design a format that would accomplish these goals, engage the public and determine the conclusions of those in attendance. This was not the methodology and small group dialogue that typifies our work at the foundation, but we participated because more information shared with the public on such an important community decision is inherently valuable.

The presentation materials were developed by city staff and the team of consultants representing Trahan Architects, Conventional Wisdom, City Visions, ConsultEcon, Global Spectrum and Denark Construction.

The forums were promoted through advertising, news releases, email and social networking.

The forums were held on Wednesday August 24 and Thursday August 25 at the RiverPark Center and on Friday August 26 at Western Kentucky University – Owensboro. The forums ran from approximately 6:00 p.m. to 8:45 p.m.

During each forum, presentations by Bill Parrish and the consultants comprised approximately 90 minutes. Questions and comments from the audience were welcomed in verbal or written form and comprised approximately 75 minutes. Volunteers sorted the written questions to reduce duplication. Attendees were invited to pose questions or make additional comments directly with city staff or the consultants following the forum.

The forums attracted 291 on Wednesday, 171 on Thursday and 72 on Friday for a total of 534 attendees. This number does not include city or county staff, elected officials, volunteers or consultants.

Demographic breakdown of those who completed questionnaires:

	Forum Participants	Census Data
Male	60 percent	48 percent
Female	40 percent	52 percent
City resident	73 percent	58 percent
County resident	27 percent	42 percent
18-24	2 percent	9 percent
25-34	6 percent	12 percent
35-54	25 percent	28 percent
55+	68 percent	26 percent

Questionnaires were distributed toward the end of the program. Approximately 317 participants (60 percent) completed questionnaires (although some did not complete every item on the questionnaire).

Another 119 participants (22 percent) added comments to their questionnaires. Some questions and comments were submitted prior to the forum by those who were unable to attend. (All the comments are attached as an addendum to this report.)

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

The proposed convention center is

the right size	224 (73%)
too large and should be scaled back	65 (21%)
too small and should be expanded	19 (6%)

If additional funds are needed

Use existing city resources or revenues	150 (44%)
Scale back the size of the convention center	59 (17%)
Scale back other components of the downtown plan	45 (13%)
Borrow additional funds – if no tax increase	90 (26%)

Impressions of the convention center's...

	5	4	3	2	1
	<u>very favorable/favorable</u>		<u>not sure</u>		<u>unfavorable/very unfavorable</u>
location	287 (91%)		6 (2%)		21 (7%)
size	233 (74%)		33 (10%)		50 (16%)
appearance/design	252 (77%)		45 (14%)		30 (9%)
use of riverfront	268 (82%)		32 (10%)		25 (8%)
cost	240 (69%)		51 (15%)		55 (16%)
impact on..					
tourism/conventions	238 (84%)		21 (7%)		23 (8%)
the rest of downtown	238 (76%)		47 (15%)		28 (9%)
economic development	250 (75%)		48 (14%)		36 (11%)
community pride	277 (83%)		28 (8%)		28 (8%)
community image	261 (84%)		27 (9%)		23 (7%)

COMMENTS

General feelings about the project

The most frequent comments added to the questionnaires were brief expressions of support for the convention center project. Twenty-six such comments were submitted. Examples include:

“Go for it! Exciting! I’m proud to be part of this community! A no-brainer; Let’s do it! A convention center is essential. Best thing that’s ever happened to Owensboro. A Home Run! Owensboro will be a destination.” People will come!”

“We’re on the right track. We need the convention center. Do this while rates are low. We must be bold! Look forward to this being built – go for the largest design.”

“Need this now! A showplace! Long overdue. Thank you! I fully endorse.”

Just a couple of added comments reflected an overall negative tone: *“We don’t need it.”* And they questioned if this is the right time.

Concerns about costs

The second most frequent group of comments was related to costs. There were 19 such comments. For example:

“The assumptions are too optimistic. It’s too high. We can’t afford it! It will be a white elephant. I’m concerned about the operating deficit. We can’t compete with large cities. The economy is far from recovery; wait until we have the money. Seems so excessive for the times we’re living in.”

“Taxes are too high already. This community couldn’t support the Executive Inn – how can we support this?”

“Have operating deficits been factored into city and county budgets? I’m concerned with the projections of events. What will it cost to keep the windows clean?”

Several participants noted that they now understand the rationale for building a larger center. One commented that he trusts the city finance director.

Need for more and earlier information

Comments related to communication shortcomings were expressed by 17 forum participants. They said things like:

“These forums should have been held earlier, and it should have been a more open process. Long overdue. Waited too late. If there had been involvement earlier then these forums wouldn’t have been necessary.”

“Residents were not considered. City has made up their mind and the people will pay for their mistakes. City should have been more forthcoming about costs until they were challenged. Regular citizens tired of being railroaded.”

“The die is cast; it’s too late to change anything.”

However, there were 10 comments on questionnaires in which forum participants complimented officials for the informative nature of the forums:

“Very informative! Excellent! Good information! Impressed with Bill Parrish. Superior presentation. Appreciate all the hard work and study on this project.”

Local construction jobs

Eight questions and comments were related to labor issues and concerns. For example:

“Insist that our local men and women build this. Use a Project Labor Agreement. Require that local skilled craftsmen work on the project. This needs to be quality construction.”

Architecture

Three participants applauded the convention center design with statements like:

“Great architecture! Love it! Loved the first three-story design, but I still like the more affordable two-level design.”

But six participants shared concerns about the design:

“It’s too modern to fit with current city architecture. It doesn’t blend. It doesn’t fit in - too eclectic. Should fit in with RiverPark Center. Looks like a shrine to the architects.”

Size

Ten comments were added about the size and were divided equally. Some think the center is too big. Some think it is the right size. Some want it to be large enough for sporting events and high school graduations. Some don't want us to look back and wish we had built it larger.

Hotel

Four participants added comments to their questionnaire in which they expressed the need for more hotel rooms near the convention center.

Parking

Three comments were added to stress the need for adequate parking considering the high volume of traffic and attendance projected by the consultants.

Impact on downtown and the downtown plan

Three participants commented that the downtown will benefit greatly from the convention center. Three others were concerned about the impact of the expanded and more costly convention center on the Gateway master plan.

Other

Several additional topics were added to one or two questionnaires.

These include:

the importance of and the belief that private investment will be attracted to downtown as a result of the convention center

the concern that the use and option to use local event planners and caterers may not be allowed at the new center

the importance of the street and sidewalk improvements and amenities such as bikeways, bike racks, beautification, farmer's market, programs at the new park, and more

the need for a tennis center

the need to use geothermal and solar power

concerns about meeting earthquake standards

strong support of downtown housing

concerns that the African American community has not been involved

the need to emphasize marketing

the need for a professional management team

concerns about the service area on the riverside

SUMMARY OF WRITTEN COMMENTS

Comment	Number of Comments
General impressions – positive	***** (26)
General impressions – negative	** (2)
Concerns about costs	***** (19)
Need for more and earlier info	***** (17)
Local construction jobs	***** (8)
Architecture – supportive	*** (3)
Architecture – concerns	***** (6)
Size – too big	***** (5)
Size – right size	***** (5)
Hotel- need for more rooms	**** (4)
Parking	*** (3)
Impact on downtown plan	*** (3)
Other	* or ** (1 or 2)

CONCLUSIONS

The three forums were well-attended. Few community events such as this attract 534 people – no matter the issue or proposal. Such participation reflects widespread interest and concerns about downtown, riverfront and the convention center project.

Forum participants did not comprise a scientific sample. They did, however, reflect a valuable cross section of the community. There is a need to attract the perspective of more young people who were not well-represented.

The forums were educational. A torrent of information was shared by city staff and a large team of consultants to the point that it could be overwhelming. Consequently, there was not as much time as we had hoped for the question and comment period.

The significant take-aways from the forums:

1. By an overwhelming margin, forum participants support the latest and more ambitious convention center size.
2. The convention center is very popular among the forum participants. They see significant impact in the use of the riverfront, impact on downtown, community pride, tourism, employment, etc.
3. There is value in surveys and polls, but respondents may or may not be informed about an issue. Participants in these forums benefited from a 90-minute presentation and a follow-up question and comment session before they were asked to come to judgment and complete questionnaires.
4. There are lingering concerns about costs – both capital construction and operating subsidies.
5. To fund a shortfall, participants prefer that the city use existing funds or revenues. They are open to borrowing money if it does not involve a tax increase.
6. Most forum participants do not want the downtown plan to be scaled back because of the higher priced convention center.
7. Based on comments added to the questionnaire and questions and comments that were submitted in writing, there appears to be a strong

sense that this kind of information is appreciated and that it should have been shared with the public early and regularly throughout the development of the downtown plan and convention center.

8. There appears to be solid support for local contractors to receive work on the convention center construction.

ADDENDUM

Forum Agenda

Questionnaire

Tallies

Compilation of comments added to questionnaires

Compilation of questions and comments submitted in writing

Compilation of questions submitted verbally