

ALLIANT ENERGY CENTER (AEC) TASK FORCE REPORT

Summary of the task

The Alliant Energy Center (AEC) and Exhibition Hall are estimated to provide nearly \$88 million in direct local economic impact, and welcomes more than one million people attending more than 500 events annually. With a unique mixture of facilities, the center continues to serve as venue to a wide variety of conventions, trade shows, meetings and entertainment.

The complex, made up of a variety of buildings, parking areas and grounds, is aging and at the same time, the convention market is changing. A short and long-term solution are both in order. In the short-term, Phase I, the goal is to retain current customers while taking steps toward providing a long-term vision (Phase II).

The goal of Phase II is to explore the possibility of creating a premiere destination, and the key for achieving this goal is developing a vision and providing a process to get there. An essential part of Phase II will be consideration of innovative private/public partnerships or other investment opportunities that will aid in the funding to make the vision a reality.



The Task Force, meetings and presentations

There are 16 members of the Task Force representing experts in design, marketing, entertainment, convention/exhibition business, as well as neighborhood representatives and County Board supervisors. The Task Force met six times, and two subsets of the group, one focused on marketing and one on design, emerged to focus on specific topics as needed.

There were numerous presentations given at Task Force meetings, including:

- Presentations on local redevelopment projects/proposals (Capitol East District, Downtown Madison Plan, Nolan Centennial Project, and Stoughton Road Revitalization Plan Design Process)
- Market presentations on Trade Shows, Hotels, and Concerts
- Design presentations on the Capitol East District, the Downtown Master Plan, and the Nolan Centennial Project

- Market presentations on current and future market opportunities and national trends in the industry
- Economic studies including the World Dairy Expo State Economic Impact Report and a presentation on the 2011 Center for Exhibition Industry Report (CEIR).
- Visit and tour with Doug Ducate, President and CEO of the Center for the Exhibition Industry.

Strengths and weaknesses of the current AEC complex

The AEC complex is big - 164 acres, and is made up of a unique combination of facilities, that provides space for a wide variety of users, and sizes and types of shows. For instance, some of the biggest shows will use the entire complex including indoor and outdoor spaces (one example of this is the World Dairy Expo).

The location is also ideal, with easy access to the beltline and Interstate 90/94, and located in such a way that visitors who want to visit downtown Madison can enjoy easy access to downtown, and those that prefer to make AEC their sole destination can easily do that as well.

The expansive on-site parking lots have been identified as a major asset by many customers and have played a vital role in attracting events like Family Motorcoach, Gold Wing Road Riders, Airstream, Good Sam and others.

One disadvantage often mentioned by potential customers is the lack of available hotel rooms within walking distance of the facility.

From a regional perspective, AEC is sitting in a critical location within other redevelopment and economic development opportunities. Looking from above, one can see it in this broader context along with the University of Wisconsin campus including the Kohl Center, Downtown Madison, and the East Washington Avenue corridor and the emerging Capital East District. The site plays a role as gateway into the city from John Nolen Drive and Rimrock Road, similar to that envisioned for Stoughton Road where it meets the beltline.

From a natural landscape perspective, the AEC is sitting across from the Olin Turville Park, Lake Monona and City of Madison parks including the Goodman Pool. For the site itself, the physical, natural and geologic history of the site, as well as it's traditional role as part of agricultural history offer valuable themes and identity to utilize in future planning and design for the site.

AEC Occupancy

The highest occupancy is in the first quarter of the year. Although occupancy rates throughout the year have changed over time, the first quarter remains the strongest. Consumer shows want weekends and most of those take place in the first quarter. Most recent growth has been in convention/trade shows and these are not limited to weekends, and also, they do not favor the first quarter of the year.

Event types and market segment

The Greater Madison Convention and Visitors Bureau did a break-down of contracted AEC events by type and market segment. The types are 33% convention, 23% trade shows, 19% sports, 12% convention combined with tradeshow; and the remaining 13% are made up of assembly, meetings, entertainment events and conferences. The top 3 market segments, adding up to over 50%, include hobby/consumer shows (40%), Agriculture (14%), and sports/athletic (9%).

Trade Shows

A survey done in 2006 made various recommendations for the AEC. One recommendation was that the AEC should attract more big events. One large event is worth several smaller ones combined. *Small* is defined as one day and using only one space, while *big* is defined as using multiple days and using 50,000 or more square feet of space. The study also noted that it is not just the availability of space, but also the timing of that availability, that is critical. This includes timing of ingress and egress - shows moving in while others are moving out.

Concerts

Currently concerts are held in the Coliseum, Exhibition Hall and Willow Island. Right now, there are ways of breaking up the space to accommodate smaller venues within the larger space, that would allow flexibility in the type of acts that can be booked. Although the building is solid, for concerts, the Coliseum can feel out of date and updates are recommended. *Please see Phase 1 potential improvements..*

The concert business has changed a lot. Currently shows are either for 4,000 or fewer seats, or 10,000+ seats. There are 7,500-8,000 seats in the coliseum. The building has only one door for loading (with no loading dock), and has limited backstage space. It is not uncommon for shows to have 5-12 trucks. Stage hand costs are higher here compared to other buildings because it takes longer to rig and load here. Shows that sell out quickly in other markets, do not sell out here. The reasons why are uncertain, but could include competing entertainment business from other Madison attractions (such as University of Wisconsin athletics, shows at the Overture Center in downtown Madison, events in surrounding communities) or needed upgrades to enhance the customer experience at the Coliseum..

Outdoor space, namely Willow Island, has limited potential for headliner concerts during the mid-summer months. However, it has a lot of potential for smaller festival type events that also contain a concert component. Willow Island would need a great deal of additional infrastructure to accomplish this goal, however, and when compared to other potential improvements, may not take top priority. With exclusivity deals at other outdoor shows (most important Summerfest in Milwaukee), there are not be many acts available during the outdoor months of the year. The proximity to residential neighborhoods, and potential noise concerns, should also be noted.

Market Trends

The exhibition industry has fared pretty well in 2011 and is anticipated to continue doing so into the future. Based on historic data, the industry has proven quite resilient to economic decline and is resilient during the current recovery. Different venues built at different times have different strengths and weaknesses. Oftentimes older venues need to work on repurposing their buildings as a key to ongoing success. It is worth noting that it is not simply amount of space, but location, that is important to customers.

The industry has transitioned away from huge all encompassing shows to much greater specialization. A good illustration of this trend is in sporting goods. At one time there were mega shows that included every product imaginable – everything from team sports to fly fishing. Now there are separate shows for different categories of sporting goods each serving more specific customers. This has resulted in the need for more varied and flexible space.

Trends worth noting include: attendance at trade shows is continuing to rise; the economic impact of the trade show industry is increasing; in many cases exhibits are becoming bigger and more elaborate; exhibits are more technologically advanced, and attendees are expecting to and will use, personal technology at trade shows.

What these trends tell us is that more functional space is needed to accommodate expanding attendance; the mix of convention services and space needed for exhibitors may need to be expanded; research into the local community's interests and strengths would be worthwhile; and to satisfy the technological needs of exhibitors and attendees, upgrading existing technological infrastructure should be pursued. Please see *Attachment A* in Appendix for more detail.



Market Opportunities report (25 or 50k addition to Expo Hall)

Already the AEC has a list of current annual events with the need for 50,000 square feet of Exhibition Hall Expansion. In addition, we are aware of numerous potential customers (some we have had in the past and some that would be brand new to the AEC), if the Exhibition Hall were to be expanded by 25,000 and/or 50,000 square feet of space. This potential has considerable regional economic development impact. Please see *Attachment B* in the Appendix for a detailed list of potential shows.

Transportation connections/options

Needless to say, transportation is an extremely important issue for the success of the AEC. Already situated in a very beneficial location off of the beltline on the way into downtown Madison, with close connections to the UW campus, downtown Madison and to the Monona Terrace, connections can always be improved and mode choice increased. It is critical that the AEC be identified as an important destination within the *City of Madison Transportation Plan* that will soon be underway.

AEC Complex Upgrades/Maintenance Needs

The Task Force has identified a number of enhancements to enhance customer experience and increase the competitiveness of the Exhibition Hall. Options include expanded space (more flat, meeting and break-out space), a new roof, carpeting replacement, improvement to lighting controls and features, and fire alarm system upgrades. More stable space, newer stalls, and improvements in ventilation and power supply are recommended improvements for the AEC grounds' Ag Exhibit Buildings. The parking lot could benefit from credit card processing capabilities at all gates, more collection points, resurfacing and painting, and lighting improvements.

The Coliseum could be enhanced with more bathrooms, concourse upgrades, team/dressing room upgrades, a rigging grid to reduce stage hand costs, new roll down store-front gates for the lobby, box office improvements, exterior door repairs, exterior lighting upgrades for energy efficiency, and new HVAC fans.

The Arena, the oldest building, could be enhanced with overall updating to increase its marketability for existing and potential customers. The Midwest Horse Fair and other equine events, for example, would benefit from an impermeable barrier to keep footing (dirt) dry during winter storage. A larger kitchen is would enhance food service operations, and the entire AEC complex could benefit from WiFi service. This service could be set up in variety of ways combining free service in shared areas and pay-for-service in others.

Phase I Potential Improvements

The Task Force worked on a list, or “menu”, of potential Phase I items. The menu shows all ideas and they are *not* listed in priority order.

Exhibition Hall:

- Exposition Hall interior maintenance and upgrades:
 - a. New raised seating for spectator events
 - b. Replace carpeting in the Atrium and meeting rooms
 - c. Replace lighting controls in the Exhibition Halls
 - d. Replace fire alarm system
 - e. Improve pedestrian lighting at entrances.
 - f. Re-roof entire building in 2017
- Expand and update the kitchen.
- Expansion of halls by 25,000 or 50,000 sq. ft.
- Increase amount of meeting and breakout space

Coliseum:

- Add/expand restrooms, especially women's restrooms
- Remodel concourses to address "tired" look
- Coliseum Improvements and Upgrades:
 - a. Replace roll-down store front gates in each lobby
 - b. Replace programmable message centers above each lobby box office to communicate upcoming event information to attendees and ticket purchasers.
 - c. Replace all exterior doors in lobbies and concourses.
 - d. Replace exterior lights with energy efficient systems.
 - e. Upgrade team rooms and dressing rooms used by performers.
 - f. Replace HVAC fans.
 - g. Replace Coliseum fire alarm system.
- Install new rigging grid.
- Upgrade to an adjustable loading dock that can accommodate at least two semi-trailers.
- Install additional seats (up to 1,500) at the south end of the arena.
- Install new capacity reduction curtain. Having a system that allows creation of smaller spaces within the large space, carefully blocking the view of empty seats, would bring more small events and acts to the Coliseum.
- Widen team room entry points. These rooms are used by performers.
- Move the box office from the west lobby to the east lobby. The Coliseum box office is in the west lobby, while most people tend to look for it in the east lobby that faces John Nolen Drive, thus it should be moved to the east lobby.

Arena and Ag Exhibit Buildings:

- Increase barn space needed to house animals.
- New HVAC for the Arena.
- Additional bathrooms for the Arena.
- The Arena needs general upgrades.
- Upgrades to the agriculture exhibit buildings including:
 - a. new exterior doors.
 - b. better ventilation.
 - c. more electrical power available for exhibitors.
 - d. new stalls

Parking Lots:

- Resurfacing and striping
- Conduct a parking and circulation study.
- Find alternatives to parking entrance barricades/gates (perhaps part of above study).
- Provide processing of credit cards as an option for paying the parking and/or admission fees at the toll booths.
- Increase number of collection points at the Main and East Rusk Avenue gates.
- Replace parking lights with energy efficient lighting.

- Install lights in the Northwest Parking lot.
- General maintenance – route & crack fill, consider chip seal and repair asphalt where necessary.

Grounds:

- Make WiFi available at the entire AEC complex including the grounds.
- A second dirt storage building is needed to store dirt over the winter, or a cement pad in the bunker.
- Site improvements (signage, landscaping, parking, circulation) geared toward improved first impression and way finding.
- Develop a landscaping, parking and signage plan. This could possibly be a UW Landscape Architecture student project.

Other:

- Engage in City of Madison/MPO Transportation Plan making sure that the AEC is identified as an important destination.
- Conduct marketing/feasibility study for Phase II.

Improvements made during course of AEC Task Force meetings

A brief visual review of the property from Rimrock Road and John Nolan Drive was conducted to identify cost effective Phase I improvements. For photos from the site assessment, please see *Attachment C*.

Working with the Task Force, some immediate site improvements were made by AEC staff, including:

- The majority of concrete blocks have been moved from the southeast corner of AEC along Rimrock Road;
- The cement block that held the three posts from the old entry sign to the left of center gate as you enter from Rimrock has been removed; and
- A plan for the entryway corner that has five sign poles is in development. Right now it has the following: the tall pole (actually flag pole) that has nothing on it will be removed; the street sign will be removed and the street will be stenciled on the curb; the wayfinding signs will be consolidated on one pole, which along with the street light, will be the only two poles remaining.



In addition, the AEC has submitted an application to the University of Wisconsin School of Landscape Architecture to have plans developed for landscaping and signage around the Center's grounds, with a focus on John Nolen Drive and Rimrock Road.

Phase II Recommendations

Phase II Design Process

Design Group

The design group met four times and they also attended a tour of the Epic campus. The group discussed issues and ideas for both phases of the project. Finding a balance of making affordable changes that would improve the AEC as part of Phase I, while not creating anything that would interfere with Phase II, was a constant thread throughout the discussions. Early on, it was recognized that creating a process for Phase II would be an important product for this group to recommend. At the beginning of Phase II we will be providing materials on design principals and potential planning process.

It should also be noted that financing is part of the big picture. Phase II cannot be accomplished with the current county ownership and funding structure. The Task Force will have to identify funding sources, financing strategies, and potential public/private partnerships.