

Chamber supports convention center collaboration - Herald-Times (Bloomington, IN) - September 1, 2019

September 1, 2019 | Herald-Times (Bloomington, IN) | Erin Predmore

This guest commentary was submitted by Erin **Predmore**, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce.

Current efforts to expand the Monroe Convention Center have been underway for more than two years. Previous attempts to increase the capacity of this community asset date back more than a decade.

We urge our local leaders to work collaboratively — and with a sense of urgency — to complete this long-delayed project.

The current center, which opened in 1991, is a partnership between Monroe County and the city of Bloomington. That partnership has been rocky at times — a fact reflected in the length of time it's taking to move this expansion project forward.

A steering committee appointed jointly by the city and county met for several months, working with consultants to develop options for the size and location of an expanded center. In May, the group made its recommendations — to build a new structure on a city-owned lot north of the current center. It would be connected to the existing center, which would be renovated. The next step was to hold public forums concentrating on design details.

But Monroe County commissioners put the brakes on the current process in May, citing concerns over the county's role in their partnership with the city and questions over how the project will be financed.

Two months later in July, commissioners issued a memo outlining a new proposal. Key elements involve:

- 1.) Convening a meeting of the city and county councils, along with the commissioners and the mayor,
- 2.) identifying funding sources for the expansion,
- 3.) answering questions about the facilities to be built, including a new hotel and garage, and
- 4.) creating a Capital Improvement Board to manage this process.

The Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce supports creating an improvement board and conducting a financial review. We agree with commissioners, as stated in their memo, that officials are "well-positioned to immediately and efficiently discuss and make decisions." However, we differ on the scope of those decisions.

It's appropriate for elected officials to give guidance on this project and to ensure fiduciary oversight.

We support holding a joint public meeting to create and empower a improvement board and to provide direction for the board's work. Such a meeting should take place as soon as possible. Beyond that, leadership requires the ability to delegate.

Our community is blessed with a remarkable number of people who are smart, responsible and civically engaged. We already trust our fellow residents to do some heavy lifting in the civic sphere on a volunteer basis. Appointed groups like the redevelopment commissions for both Bloomington and Monroe County are empowered to allocate tax dollars in support of economic development projects that benefit the public. Our city and county parks commissions are also empowered to be strong fiscal stewards over important community assets.

We trust that community members who are appointed to the improvement board would do the same.

The convention center project becomes more expensive as time goes by and construction costs increase. The opportunity costs are also significant. Conventions are booked years in advance, and given the uncertainty of our convention center's expansion, we're losing out on these future opportunities.

We urge our community's elected officials to move quickly to convene a joint meeting focused on moving forward with this project. Create a Capital Improvement Board to manage the expansion and populate the CIB with some of the many experienced community members who have the expertise and willingness to bring this project to fruition.

An expanded convention center will benefit the entire Bloomington/Monroe County community. We're eager to support the work that's needed to make this a reality.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Erin Predmore, 'Chamber supports convention center collaboration', *Herald-Times* (online), 1 Sep 2019 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.monroe.lib.in.us/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/175AF163692FA3E0>>

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