A New Convention Center for Buffalo: Whether? Where? How?

A roundtable discussion sponsored by Working for Downtown

Robert Shibley and Bradshaw Hovey, Editors
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Editors

The Urban Design Project
University at Buffalo
School of Architecture and Planning

Moderated by
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With

Keith Belanger
M&T Bank and Buffalo Place Inc.

Thomas L. Connors
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Richard Geiger
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Mark Goldman
Calumet Arts Café

Mark Mendell
Cannon Design

John Nussbaumer
Citizens for Common Sense

A roundtable discussion
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A great deal has happened since Working For Downtown convened its public forum on the future of convention facilities in Buffalo, January 28, 2000. Much further public discussion followed, with some expressing enthusiasm for a new convention center, others questioning its need, feasibility, or expected benefits. Issues of architecture, location, and the relationship of any new facility to the surrounding city, have been well-aired. Even more has been written and said on the issue, and all this against a backdrop of changing economic circumstances in the region. Now, Erie County government is conducting an environmental impact statement to assess alternative sites as well as a "no-build" option. There is, no doubt, still more to discuss.

The strategic plan for downtown Buffalo includes a new convention center as one of a number of major public investments seen necessary for the future development of downtown. In the review of the plan conducted by Downtown Buffalo 2002! a diverse public rated action on a new convention center as sixth priority in a field of eighteen initiatives. Whatever the final results of the current deliberations, a decision on a new convention center will become part of a revised strategic plan for downtown.

Answering the questions of whether, where and how to build a new convention center will become a major part of the legacy of this decade of placemaking in downtown Buffalo and the Buffalo Niagara region. But a decision about convention facilities in Buffalo should not be driven by any single force alone, whether it is the press, business, special interest groups, developers, or the general public. Instead, we need to find a way to engage all of the interested constituencies in a reasoned, thoughtful, and well-informed discussion as a means for coming to a mature public judgment about what is best for our city and region. This means listening carefully to all sides in the ongoing debate, recognizing the good intentions of all parties, and finding a way to reach a shared-victory solution, not the defeat of any one party by the others. Working For Downtown should be commended for convening such a discussion.

Robert G. Shibley
May 11, 2001
The future of the convention business and convention facilities in Buffalo, and in particular, the proposal for a new convention center for downtown Buffalo, have become matters of considerable controversy in the community over the past several years. In an effort to shed some light on the key issues involved, Working For Downtown convened a panel discussion with participation by experts and concerned citizens on several sides of the convention center matter.

The discussion was tightly focused on three key questions. Does Buffalo need a new convention center? If it does, where should it go? And given any particular site, what needs to be done to make it fit in the urban fabric as harmoniously as possible? The roundtable was held at the Adam’s Mark Hotel downtown on January 28, 2000.

Moderator Robert G. Shibley urged the panelists to treat the discussion not as a debate, or as a contest, but as a way to come to mutual understanding about the interests, values, and concerns of the respective participants in an important community decision-making process. There aren’t two sides to the convention center issue, Shibley suggested, but many, many facets of opinion to be explored and understood. Making a reasoned and mature public judgment, he added, will require listening as well as talking, and a real effort to understand what’s behind differing points of view.

The following is a condensed transcript of that roundtable discussion. Shibley urged the participants to be brief. Where the panelists were unable to be brief, the editors have provided some assistance. This record of the discussion has been reviewed and approved by all of the panelists.
The Panelists

Keith Belanger is Senior Vice President for facilities for M&T Bank, where he manages more than three million square feet of space in bank facilities. He also serves as chairman of the board of directors of Buffalo Place, Inc., treasurer for the Greater Buffalo Convention and Visitors Bureau, and member of the board of Buffalo Civic Auto Ramps. Belanger was also a member of the Erie County convention center task force. He is a graduate of the Harvard School of Business.

Thomas L. Connors is a Senior Vice President of SMG, a convention center planning, development and operations firm, and the world leader in private management of public assembly facilities. SMG now operates 65 facilities with nearly 6 million square feet of exhibition space. Connors was previously general manager of the prestigious Miami Beach Convention Center. He was a member of the consultant team to the Erie County convention center task force. Connors holds a degree in communications from Michigan State University, and is a graduate of St. Benedict’s school in Eggertsville.

Richard Geiger has been the President and CEO of the Greater Buffalo Convention and Visitors Bureau since 1995. He spent ten years as director of convention sales and marketing for the Orlando/Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and was sales manager for the Syracuse Convention and Visitors Bureau. Geiger is a member of the board of directors for the International Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus, and served as a member of the Erie County convention center task force.

Mark Goldman is the founder of the Calumet Arts Café in downtown Buffalo and a citizen concerned about the impact of the proposed convention center and skeptical about its necessity. Goldman holds a Ph.D. in History from the University at Buffalo and is the author of two books on Buffalo history and public policy. Goldman resigned as a member of the Erie County convention center task force.

Mark Mendell is a widely recognized architect and president of Cannon Design, a national architecture firm headquartered in Grand Island. Mendell is widely published in professional and scholarly journals and has won more than twenty major design awards. He is a member of the American Institute of Architects large firm roundtable, a member of the board of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and a member of the board of directors of The American Motorcycle Heritage Foundation. He is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. Mendell also served as consultant to the Erie County convention center task force.

John Nussbaumer is a partner in Lake George Forest Products, and a 38-year veteran of the lumber manufacturing industry. He is also a former member of the Presidential honor guard in Washington, DC, and a graduate of Franklin and Marshall College. Nussbaumer has been active on the convention center issue as a concerned citizen interested in sustaining life on the streets, retaining existing businesses, and working for higher-end jobs in downtown Buffalo.

Robert G. Shibley, moderator, is director of the Urban Design Project, a center in the University at Buffalo’s School of Architecture and Planning; director of Downtown 2002!, a collaborative strategic plan review and implementation process for downtown Buffalo; director of the Buffalo neighborhood and downtown Summit series (1994-99); former Special Assistant to Mayor Anthony M. Masiello; and a professor of Architecture and Planning. He has published five books and dozens of articles on urban design.
Do We Need a New Convention Center?

SHIBLEY: Let’s begin with a little bit of groundwork about conventions in Buffalo. Rich Geiger, I understand that the women’s bowling convention in 1996 was an important point in the history of this issue. Tell us what happened.

GEIGER: In the spring of 1996, this community hosted the Women’s International Bowling Congress. We had 50,000 women bowlers in Buffalo and throughout Erie County over the course of about seven weeks. They used the convention center, they slept in hotels, they rented cars, they ate in restaurants, they bought merchandise from all the stores. It was an incredible infusion of new dollars into this market place. After the convention ended, we began to get a lot of phone calls from business people asking, “How did this happen? How do we get more of this?”

So, a small group of people got together to talk about what we might do. We commissioned a study, which was funded by State, County, City, the Greater Buffalo Partnership, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Convention Center. We wanted someone to help analyze our convention market, where we might go with it, and whether there was any future in the convention business here at all. We hired C.H. Johnson in early 1997. Later that year he issued a report that said there is pent-up demand for New York State and Buffalo in the convention industry. It said if we had a proper facility we could draw convention business to generate more than $58 million in additional direct economic impact in this community. The study defined what a proper facility would be and sites where it might be built.

We had a series of other consultants who came to town and they all endorsed Johnson’s findings. At that point, County Executive Dennis Gorski, with the County Legislature, decided it was time to take a thorough look at sites. That was when Cannon Design was engaged and they worked throughout the year with the task force of State, County and City, and public and private sector representatives. With input from national meeting planners, they developed a set of criteria with which to choose ten potential sites, and then narrowed it down to the one that’s been recommended, the Mohawk site.

SHIBLEY: Thanks, Rich. While all of that was going on there were a number of what you might call side-bar discussions. John Nussbaumer, can you tell us a little bit about what’s been going on in your offices?

NUSSBAUMER: Last August we got together a group of people who were concerned with the fabric of the core of downtown Buffalo. Mark Goldman came on board right away. Tim Tielman from the Preservation Coalition joined. Dan Sack, Jim Rozanski, Herb Guenther have all been involved. Jessie Schnell, a dynamic young planner here in Buffalo, has been very helpful and given us a lot of direction, and so has Beth Hoskins, a public relations specialist. It’s a very diverse group of people with a lot of knowledge, all focused on one thing but coming from a lot of different areas.
Do We Need a New Convention Center?

A New Convention Center for Buffalo:

When the present convention center was proposed there were a lot of projections about the impact it would have. It was going to create 3,000 new hotel rooms. There was going to be $80 million worth of development in downtown Buffalo because of the convention center. Fifteen hundred new parking spaces would actually happen. But we all know what happened. The convention center created a dead space around itself. They closed down some streets. A lot of businesses didn’t survive the construction period. Some failed later. We’re afraid the same thing will happen on the Mohawk site — what we call the Electric District site. Building there would take down some more blocks, with 30 businesses or more that would be displaced. Some might stay downtown if they are forced to relocate, but some of them will go elsewhere.

SHIBLEY: Keith Belanger, during the various study efforts, I understand that M&T put some money into a kind of second opinion. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

BELANGER: We actually funded a couple of different aspects of the review process. The Johnson study came out in December of 1997. Then we asked Economic Research Associates to take a look at the Johnson report to give us some confidence that the assumptions we had made were appropriate. They did just that. After that, we brought in a panel of urban planning experts, including the former chairman of the Rouse Company, and asked them to review the Johnson study, and facilitate some dialogue about whether it made any sense to proceed with this project. The bottom line conclusions from this group was: you should proceed. In fact, they walked around downtown and steered us to a specific site, which happens to be the site that we are talking about today.

SHIBLEY: Rich Geiger: what do we need a convention center for? What is the pay off?

GEIGER: To grow our economy. The tourism and convention industries are huge, and they’re growth industries. It’s predicted that the convention and travel industry will double in size over the next decade. So I believe there is an opportunity to hook one of our economic wagons to this convention train. It’s not the only thing that will resolve our economic woes, but it is truly one that would help us. Ninety billion dollars were spent last year on conventions, trade shows, and...
meetings in this country. With a newer, larger facility, appropriately placed and marketed, we can capture more of that $90 billion for Buffalo.

All of our reports have shown that we can derive an additional $58 million in economic impact from the convention industry by building a better convention center. A new center can create a thousand much-needed jobs and also increase our tax revenues. It will also help us further develop downtown. There are some great synergies emerging in the Chippewa area and Theater District. By building upon what's already happening there with a convention center and bringing more people into that area, you begin to create more of a critical mass of activity, which I think will have a good impact on the entire downtown area.

SHIBLEY: Mark Goldman, what is the downside of a decision to bring a new convention center to Buffalo?

GOLDMAN: With all due respect to Rich, I don’t think the fact that he believes we can tap into a market, or somebody else believes there is going to be an effusion of new dollars, means that it’s going to happen. I’m skeptical about these people from Baltimore or wherever they come from. I am skeptical about this town here. Three years ago, this organization was called Women for Downtown. But in all the major planning decisions in this community, not one woman has ever participated, as far as I know. And here you have a panel that is all men. Look at us. So, I think that we need to reorient the way we look at these problems. I think that we need to be skeptical of the usual suspects making the same old projections that were made in 1970 about the convention center, none of which came true.

I think that we need to be skeptical of the usual suspects making the same old projections that were made in 1970 about the convention center, none of which came true. So, I am skeptical of those of us who are making these decisions and skeptical of people armed with data from the outside, talking about the Inner Harbor, talking about Cleveland. I am skeptical about a group of decision makers that leave out so many people who are so concerned about this.

I just want to add one thing to what John Nussbaum said. He mentioned individuals who are involved. But it’s not so much the individuals that have joined the Citizens for Common Sense, it is who these people represent. They represent people who live in and use this city on a daily basis. They represent people who want their libraries, who want their streets and who want their downtown and have a very clear vision of what this community ought to be like. And this convention center does not fit that.

SHIBLEY: Let us talk about the common sense of the economics, as you see it, and maybe it is time to ask someone from out of town. Thom Connors, help us understand, from our community’s perspective, why a new convention center will be good for us here?

CONNORS: I think skepticism is a good thing. I think it always is. But as Conan Doyle wrote in the Sherlock Holmes books, once you have a roundtable discussion 9

The Rhode Island Convention Center is a key element in both the redevelopment of downtown Providence and the transformation of Rhode Island’s economy from manufacturing to services. Tourism revenues statewide are estimated at $2.5 billion annually and rising at ten percent per year. Providence Place Mall, several new hotels, and a major waterfront reclamation project, along with the new convention center, have changed the economy and landscape of downtown Providence.
eliminated the impossible, whatever you are left with, however improbable, is the truth. So, you heard already that there are two or three rounds of studies and recommendations that have been made. This is an issue that has been carefully looked at. However, there remains some skepticism.

I would like to suggest that the convention center as a building type, as a rather unique real estate development, has proven to be an effective catalyst in downtown areas to generate business. Are all convention centers successful, universally, beyond their expectations? Not every time. But, I will give you five examples where they have been: Providence, Rhode Island; Mobile, Alabama; Long Beach, California; Columbus, Ohio; and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. These are not traditional convention destinations. But within the last ten years, local government has committed to building infrastructure, convention centers, hotels, and transportation links that have made these successful destinations for regional tourism, business trips, conventions, trade shows and meetings. We're involved in all those projects.

There are different reasons why these projects are considered successful. But, one of the old maxims that has been overturned is that convention centers, themselves, are not profitable enterprises. Four of these five facilities are now generating operating profits. That's because the industry is vibrant. People are traveling more. People are meeting more. The industry is growing. Conventions, trade shows, meetings — the industry is growing. There is increasing competition, however, for those activities and, within this vibrant economy, the organizations that produce and organize the events are also growing. The point is that if you wanted to bring the women bowlers back to Buffalo, this facility could no longer accommodate them. You have a convention center from the last generation. There is a new generation of convention centers.

SHIBLEY: Mark Goldman might be the first to say we can learn from other places but that we should also be skeptical about the context. Keith, you wanted to get in with something:

BELANGER: Just a couple of quick numbers. The Johnson study looked at 15 different peer cities, and I am not talking about New York City or Los Angeles. I am talking about the Milwaukees, the Columbuses, and the Providences of the world. As one of those 15 cities you might expect Buffalo to get one-eighth of one-fifteenth of the business. The projections we have heard here today — $58 million additional direct spending — are very conservative. They're based on an assumption that if we build a facility that makes us competitive with these other 14 cities we will get one-half of one-fifteenth of the business.
GOLDMAN: This is the strangest thing, this notion of peer city. What is a peer city? Who are our peers? Keith rolled off a couple. He said Milwaukee. What makes Milwaukee a peer city? I looked at the figures, and to me, Milwaukee is not a peer city. Why? Milwaukee, which has a fabulous new convention center, is concerned that it cannot compete because it doesn’t have adequate airline service. It has only 270 daily flights coming to its airport. How many daily flights do we have coming to our airport? How many? A hundred and ten!

Milwaukee is concerned that it cannot compete because it has only 3,400 hotel rooms in the area. How many do we have? Come on, this is your issue folks. You’ve got to know these facts, otherwise you’re not going to be able to play the game. So, is that a peer city to us? I suggest that it is not. So, let’s re-examine what we mean by peer city, and let’s look very carefully at all of these figures. If Milwaukee is having trouble folks, with all the stuff they have going for them, where are we going to be with this fancy convention center?

GEIGER: Here is the trouble Milwaukee is in. Their projection was to generate in the first year of the new convention center $100 million of economic impact. It created a $130 million of economic impact. It was supposed to create 2,000 new jobs; it has created 5,000 new jobs. They have already funded doubling the size of the convention center and started to expand it before they even opened the first phase. I would like to have those types of problems in Buffalo.

SHIBLEY: John Nussbaumer, you and members of your group have written quite a bit about what might happen to existing jobs and services if the new convention center is built on the Mohawk site as proposed.

NUSSBAUMER: We’re concerned that a convention center on the Electric District site will displace and disrupt viable economic activity that we ought to be trying to maintain. We spent three weeks and went into every building, talked to every business owner and every building owner, and assembled a lot of figures about jobs maintained, income earned, and taxes paid by these enterprises. It is very substantial and ought not to be disrupted. Beyond that, tearing down these buildings will eliminate the potential for new economic activity that could occur there. They could be used for housing, for commercial space, for other activities. A lot of it already is. We’re also concerned because there’s no room for expansion around the proposed convention center site. If they want to expand the convention center there, or they need room for hotels and parking, still more usable buildings will have to be torn down. We already know, based on our own survey, that some of these displaced businesses will leave the downtown or the city altogether.

We’re equally concerned about what the loss of these buildings, and the popping down of another big long wall, and the loss of a couple more streets, will do to pedestrian traffic and street life in downtown. What downtown Buffalo needs is pedestrian traffic. We want what we have on Elmwood Avenue —- stores up and down the street, people on the sidewalks, traffic jams, congestion. If we could have that kind of congestion downtown we would love it.

A door-to-door survey of businesses conducted by the organization Citizens For Common Sense found that the small, older, mixed-use buildings of the proposed four-block project area support firms with a total of 530 employees, 616 million in annual payroll, and $50 million in total annual sales. Mohawk site opponents say the project would lead to “expropriation” of these buildings, displacement of business, and the irreparable damage to the urban fabric.
Do We Need a New Convention Center?

A New Convention Center for Buffalo:

Right now, downtown after 5:00 p.m. is just dead. Chippewa Street doesn't get started until 8:00 at night and is mostly students and young people. These are not the people the convention center will attract. As it is now, conventioneers have to get into a cab and go someplace else for dinner and entertainment. So, I say, there are other places to put the convention center.

Let's think about putting it where it won't displace existing businesses, or require more buildings to be torn down, where it can be expanded if necessary, and where it won't kill the life of the streets and the city.

SHIBLEY: We are beginning to slide into the issue of where such a center would go if indeed we should have one. But Keith, help us with the issues of displacement from the task force perspective.

BELANGER: Like John, we don't want to see those businesses displaced if it means they disappear. We had heard this concern that businesses might disappear, and we met with many of them so we could hear directly from them. Many of them --- in fact most of them --- told us that they are in buildings that today are inefficient, and if they could get out from under, they would do so tomorrow. The convention center project would give them a way to get a fair price for their property and move into more efficient platforms. There is a million and a half square feet of space downtown vacant. If we reduce that, it kills two birds with one stone.

Businesses get an opportunity to move into more efficient space, and we reduce some of the overhanging office space downtown, and make some of the other properties more viable.

GOLDMAN: I'm concerned with that approach to how cities are revitalized, Keith. We know that the way to revitalize is not to demolish buildings in the hope that you are going to create something new in their place. Every successful city in every part of the world that has revitalized itself has done it on the backs of buildings exactly like these you want to tear down.

Now, if in fact these people want to move, and if their businesses aren't suitable to this space anymore, that's fine. But if you ever want to have real living downtown, you have a sense of scale and context in those buildings here that make it really possible to get people living, working, and doing the things that they want in downtown. But the idea of displacing them and creating some kind of shortage in the hope that it is going to fill up other buildings does not make sense to me.

MENDELL: It's hard to listen to some of these comments. We have more than a million square feet that are vacant in our downtown. We have the opportunity to bring new money into this economy. I think the statistics would show that among comparable size cities, which I think is one definition of peer city, Buffalo ranks at the bottom in terms of vitality in all sorts of economic indicators. There has been a perpetual chorus of lamentation about how Buffalo has missed out on the economic
boom that has somehow been able to visit virtually every other city of our size all across the country. We’ve got to do something about that now.

I think there is a time and place for big moves. And I don’t agree with Mark that everything that has ever been good in urban design resulted from the re-use of existing facilities. Some people in this city believe the only way that we are ever going to move forward is with little moves, that if we got five hundred Mark Goldmans we would have a very vital city with a transformation exactly like the one that took place on Chippewa. But, to use a sports analogy, we have the bases loaded, we have a home run pitch coming up, we have the power to hit it out of the park, and there are people who say don’t do it. Bunt.

We cannot transform an economy of this scale with lots of little moves. We talk about dollars leaving and people moving out. Where? To the suburbs. It’s like a game of musical chairs. We need new money. We need to bring dollars into this economy that will create jobs and build small businesses. It’s hard to imagine in one single stroke how you could do that more effectively than with a new convention center.

I think skepticism is absolutely the appropriate basis for sound decision making, but at some point skepticism crosses the line into cynicism. For the cynics, it almost doesn’t matter what is represented as well researched, well analyzed, well considered, it’s not going to be accepted. The economic analysis is deep. Successful business people have reviewed the proposal and said this is what we need to do. It’s hard to turn your back on that and say, ‘well 25 years ago somebody made some projections and they did not turn out to be right, so I do not accept anything you say now.’

A roundtable discussion

Whether? Where? How?
HIBLEY: Let me just test this: Mark Mendell, I don’t think you would say “make no little moves” and Mark Goldman, you would not say “make no big moves”. We have an extreme polemic — “no big things” versus “no little things” — where the reality is that both of you are arguing for some kind of balance, and it’s on a matter of degree and the sequence of good city building that you disagree.

SHIBLEY: Let me ask next, assuming the numbers make sense, and it seems worthwhile to build a new convention center, why the Mohawk site? I’d like to ask Thom Connors to tell us a little bit about what makes a convention center work in terms of location. Thom?

CONNORS: There are a lot of different reasons, big and small, why you or I might want to visit a certain destination, things that might endear a city to you, whether it’s Toronto or Savannah or Mexico City. No one knows better than the people who live in a city what those attractive, endearing things are. So, you have to identify those things, amplify them, and build on them.

Beyond that, successful convention centers, generally, are located in city centers near shops, restaurants, and entertainment districts. Convention attendees are, fundamentally, tourists. They come to town to educate themselves, participate in corporate meetings, further their careers, sell their products, visit trade shows, or come together as buyers and sellers. But when business is over, people want to do things. So, there has to be an active environment in the urban center because they do not want to spend their precious time traveling around your city.

This is important because when people spend less time traveling to venues they spend more money at the venues themselves. David Peterson, an expert on sports, convention, and entertainment facilities for the Urban Land Institute, says that convention facilities to be successful in attracting professional associations and meetings must be located within walking distance of hotels, restaurants, retail stores, local entertainment, and other attractions. That’s where attendees expect to be. Peterson estimates that visitors spend as little as $50 a day at destinations where shops, restaurants, and entertainment districts are remote from the center, or are mundane, to about $200 per attendee per day where convention centers are in the center. This was a key criterion for us in our consulting here in Buffalo.

Meeting planners — the people who make decisions about where groups go — also tell us that the number, quality, and proximity of hotel rooms is a primary criterion. Once your destination qualifies in terms of the size, shape, and building program of the convention center itself, hotels are the next most important criterion. They prefer a headquarters hotel on site. So, regardless of what flag is on the hotel across from the Mohawk site, that was the best site for these key criteria.

SHIBLEY: Mark, given those broad criteria about access and proximity, tell us what are the specific advantages that led your team to the Mohawk site.
We assessed any site that had been previously mentioned as a possible site for the convention center — plus any other possibilities that we could come up with. We mapped 130 properties throughout the downtown, assessing their availability, size, and any historic buildings, or other reasons why it would be inappropriate to consider them. Then we boiled this all down to nine sites that had some of the most critical attributes for further consideration.

Then we evaluated these according to five criteria. First, size. The property had to be large enough to accommodate the new facility. Second, the proximity of a hotel — a hotel that exists or one that could be induced to be connected to the convention center. Third, adequate parking. Fourth, easy access by the public as well as service vehicles. Conventions generate a lot of heavy truck traffic. Many trucks actually drive right on to the convention floor to set up the exhibits. Accommodating lots of trucks and keeping them away from main thoroughfares was a significant factor. Fifth, proximity to amenities — entertainment, restaurants and other things people look for after the meetings are over.

These were the key criteria. There were a total of some twenty criteria that formed the basis for a comparative analysis, a kind of scorecard for the task force. These guided the group in going from nine sites to four, from four to two, and, finally, from two to one. Because, if there is going to be a convention center, we are only going to do it one time, at least in this generation. In our analysis, the Mohawk site best met all of these criteria.

I think it is interesting to note that the HSBC Atrium site, which is being presented by some as a viable alternative, dropped out in the very first cut. Why did it drop out? Number one, it doesn’t have a hotel. Number two, it is nowhere near entertainment, restaurants and other things conventioneers look for after the meetings are over. So it really doesn’t even matter whether the site is large enough or has space for the parking. If a site doesn’t have those critical attributes, it does not deserve any further consideration.
Where Should It Be?

A New Convention Center for Buffalo:

The conceptual diagram (i.e. not yet designed) for the Mohawk site would provide footprint and access to accommodate a building program necessary to make Buffalo competitive in a second tier convention market. But critics say the building would violate four of author Jane Jacobs’ key principles for generating urban economic diversity: primary mixed uses; short blocks; aged buildings and concentration. They argue that a single, very large facility would create a new super-block; eliminate small, older buildings that support a variety of economic activities; and eliminate all other uses except convention-related ones, thus destroying active street-life.

ERA study and three other consultants. We tend to be somewhat skeptical of public-sector plans, also. As goes Western New York, so goes us. So, we would like to see the right things done, and we plunked down the money for both of those studies.

GEIGER: Overall, Buffalo Place, Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corporation, the CVB, the Convention Center, the Partnership board were represented, plus private business owners in downtown, including some of which were located on the Mohawk site prior to it even being a site. The State, the County, the City, were all involved.

MENDELL: I think a small anecdote is illustrative of the process. When the study was finished, the County Executive asked for a meeting with the Western New York legislative delegation. It was obvious we would need a well coordinated effort to induce Albany to help fund this. We made a presentation and afterward there was a kind of silence. Then Senator Volker spoke up and he said, “You guys are making our lives miserable. We thought, for sure you would be fighting about where to put this project for at least the next couple of years. Now you are going to make us go back and work in Albany.” I think the sense of consensus and broad-based support — absent, perhaps, some of the people in this room, and short of submitting it to a public referendum — was extraordinary for any comparable single project that I am familiar with in recent memory.

SHIBLEY: John Nussbaumer, can you elaborate a bit more on the Mohawk site and why you’re opposed to it?

NUSSBAUMER: Very simply, there is already an economy there. We have talked to a lot of people who say that if the convention center goes somewhere else, they will stay where they are and operate their business, and keep employees, customers, and suppliers in the neighborhood. There are more than 500 people that come and go in that footprint over there. We should maintain that. Also, I don’t think there is a consensus in this county for building the convention center at the Mohawk site. I don’t think people really know enough about it. Earlier in the game, everybody thought it was a done deal and they just let it go. I think the process we are going through right now, with media coverage and public meetings, is helping inform people about what the choices really are.

Beyond that, I think we’re going to have trouble getting the larger conventions we’ve been talking about. The larger cities are targeting our size of convention and that is going to make it very difficult. We need to concentrate on making Buffalo a real destination city. We need to make sure the downtown becomes a vibrant place that people want to come and visit. Until then, I think a convention center is down the list of priorities. The convention center now does not operate every day of the week, fifty-two weeks a year. We need to make sure there’s economic life and life on the street every day.
GEIGER: It’s important to acknowledge that we already have a very active tourism-convention industry in this marketplace. A lot of workers and a lot of vendors depend on convention tourism for their livelihoods. There were nearly 300 meetings and conventions in Erie County in 1998 with about 200,000 visitors. We averaged 20 to 22 large conventions in the convention center over the past three years with about 150,000 visitors. There is already a lot of convention activity. The investments of well-respected companies like Adam’s Mark and Hyatt Corporation confirm this is already a viable destination.

It is not true, however, that big cities are building bigger boxes because they want to attract more smaller meetings from cities like Buffalo. This is the complete opposite of what is happening. The big guys are getting bigger because they don’t want the small stuff. The small meetings and conventions kill their patterns for the big shows. Big cities like Chicago, Orlando, and Las Vegas are building bigger boxes to go after the growing number of really big conventions. The smaller conventions are going to the secondary markets. Which means great new opportunities in markets like Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Buffalo.

CONNORS: I would support that. Secondary cities like Providence, like Fort Lauderdale in Miami’s shadow, Long Beach in Los Angeles’ shadow, and Columbus as well, are prospering by picking up events that used to go to those bigger cities. A lot of business for Savannah’s new convention center is coming because of Atlanta’s expansion. The larger groups Atlanta now targets take up all the hotel room blocks and the smaller groups can’t book any rooms even if there’s space at the convention center.

SHIBLEY: We still haven’t addressed the idea, advanced by some, that the site has historic significance to the city, either in its building fabric or in the architecture itself. Mark Goldman, do you want to address that from the standpoint of your group?

GOLDMAN: Not really. I don’t think that’s the relevant issue. I think the way this question is going to be decided is not by whose battery of statistics is better or worse. The way this question is going to be decided is really by asking ourselves over the next year-and-a-half: what kind of a city do we want to have? Do we want to have a city that reflects the values, the history, the character, the authenticity of this community or do you want to go with this sort of tasteless, placeless, nowhereville, everywheresville vision of a downtown? It’s based on values. We have a city that is falling apart at the seams. We have a city that has a high disparity between wealthy and poor. We have a city with some of the highest illiteracy rates, highest teen pregnancy rates, and to me, as a citizen and a person who loves the city, I cannot sit by and watch God knows how many hundreds of millions of public dollars go to something that is as irrelevant and inauthentic as this.

Preservation activists argue that a convention center at the “Lehigh Yards” site, east of the HSBC Atrium and north of the HSBC Arena, would be much cheaper to build than at the Mohawk site. There would be no need to replace the Mohawk parking ramp, which they estimate would save $18 million; the land is already publicly owned, saving an additional $11 million per year in real estate taxes; and the cost and disruption of providing new urban infrastructure at the Mohawk site would be unnecessary at their alternative site because these things were already done as part of the arena construction project.
How Do We Design A Building to Fit the Fabric of the City?

HIBLEY: Okay, let’s see a show of hands: everybody in favor of faceless, placeless places. Anybody?

That’s common ground. But the question that we are really pushing on is, architecturally, what does a facility the size and scale of what’s being proposed mean for downtown? Mark Mendell, just imagine the possibilities of such a “beached whale” in the fabric of our city.

MENDELL: Sure. But first I would like to answer the question Mark Goldman didn’t want to answer. There are no historic sites on this property. Much of the area is either parking lots or parking ramps. It is very quiet, some would say dead. It doesn’t now generate a lot of pedestrian traffic. Even though it has been glamorously dubbed the Electric District, it is blighted, frankly. The City has already said they would work very hard to make sure that businesses that wanted to relocate downtown or within the city would have assistance in doing so. The Urban League, Catholic Charities, and the University of Buffalo all have facilities in the site area they are prepared to leave. The historic issue is really a bit of a red herring.

As for the impact of architecture and urban design on the vitality of street life, we think the convention center can make a positive contribution. It shouldn’t be a big box with docks, and it doesn’t have to be. In fact, there is an opportunity for the building to make things better. Most urban designers who know downtown Buffalo would say it is pretty much one street wide. There’s little development toward the lake and almost none to the east. The Mohawk site provides an opportunity to push the character of downtown positively to the east. It is also a misimpression that streets are proposed to be closed. They are not. In fact, the proposal is to permit traffic to circulate on Main Street from Mohawk to Huron. We have discussed this with NFTA and it wouldn’t conflict with the rapid transit. The center would be visible all the way through to Washington Street, and it would not be the kind of concrete sarcophagus that was alluded to earlier. It will be very friendly and inviting in character, which to me is defined by transparency, being able to look into a building and to see what is going on inside. There would be a complete weather-protected connection at street level — not an elevated walkway — all the way from Lafayette Square to nearby the Fountain Plaza area. There is more than $2 million in this budget to develop retail at the street level. So, the proposed design will support the kind of activity that everybody wants, not degrade it.

Sibley: We can understand the image of the big box softened on the edges by retail space. But with more than 600,000 square feet of retail space now vacant, how can we afford to build more?

CONNORS: Much of the space might be for service companies related to the convention center itself: copying centers, Kinko’s type operations, decorating services, floral services. They do business at the convention center and outside of it. But they want a prominent location. They can be connected directly to
the center, but also have a front door to capture passing trade from the street.

SHIBLEY: How do we keep the center from being insular and inward looking, rather than letting its activity spill outward and give us the street life we all aspire to?

CONNORS: I think you can learn by the experience of others. The situation I've seen that is most like Buffalo is in Providence, Rhode Island. With some retail development, and the connection to the hotel, it has been a catalyst for downtown development there in general. Companies are getting a lot of business from the center, people are parking at the center and going to work, which they didn't do before, and new businesses have sprung up to support existing businesses. And the streetscape is comparable.

GOLDMAN: I think we should learn from experience too, and our experience is right in our backyard. Ten years ago, people would have looked at Chippewa Street and said, “Gee whiz there’s nothing really historic there, you know a bunch of empty buildings, let’s knock them down and put a convention center there.” Twenty years ago, in fact, people, Robert Moses included, looked at SoHo in New York and said “There’s nothing historically significant here, let’s knock it down and build a lower Manhattan expressway.” That’s the experience we need to look at. That’s as very real as what happened in Providence or Philadelphia. Learn from that experience, which is one we know firsthand. Ten years from now, that Electric District will be the SoHo --- if we let it --- of downtown Buffalo.

GEIGER: How come it hasn’t happened in the last ten years, Mark?

GOLDMAN: That’s because guys like you are trying to knock it down.

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Cannon Design’s diagram concept for the Mohawk site features direct and visible links to both Lafayette Square, on the south, and Roosevelt Square, opposite the Hyatt Regency Buffalo hotel, to the west. Architect Mark Mendell says the right design can keep life on the street. Preservationist Tim Tielman has suggested the proposal more resembles a 300,000 square foot Rite-Aid that would close or “tunnelize” streets in the four-block project area.

Parties on all sides of the convention issue agree that the long blank wall on Pearl Street has had a negative effect on street life and adjacent uses. Featuring corrugated pre-cast concrete panels and punctuated by emergency exit doors, the design violates the most basic principles of urban design.
A New Convention Center for Buffalo:

Questions from the Audience

HIBLEY: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen if you have questions, please step up to the mike and I will acknowledge you as we go.

QUESTIONER: My name is John Gartner. I was one of the founders of the Buffalo Ambassadors group and served three terms on the CVB board. First, of the nine sites that were considered, were any not in the center city? I feel that suburban sites could be viable. Amherst, for example, could be the site for a new convention center for the county. There is plenty of state land out there already off the tax rolls. There are more hotel rooms on the strip near Maple Road than the entire downtown section. It's near the airport and the Youngmann Highway, and the subway could be extended out Main Street to get people down to the Theater District. It's just as close to the Museum District, for example, as downtown. Why not a suburban site?

Second, what are the plans for reuse of the existing center? A casino, right now, is too damned iffy. I would hate to see one center empty and the other under construction, and then we'd have two white elephants down there instead of just one.

MENDELL: The answer is both “yes” and “no.” No, we didn’t, in our study, consider sites beyond downtown. One of the basic public policy objectives of the project was to help revitalize the core of our city. Beyond that, sites outside of downtown just don’t meet the must-have criteria of being close to entertainment amenities.

GEIGER: From a regional perspective, the answer is yes, we did consider suburban sites. The very first study done by C. H. Johnson analyzed very broadly the question of where the center would fit best. They looked at Niagara County as well as all of Erie County. The recommendation from Johnson and that consultant team was to build it downtown because then you will get both benefits, the overall economic impact and revitalization of a downtown that needs it.

QUESTIONER: What’s different today than when the existing convention center was built? Because that was the argument back then: it’s going to revitalize downtown.

CONNORS: Generally, in the United States, the suburban locations that house convention centers are secondary locations. There is a successful city center facility and a secondary suburban location may be added. But there are very few primary convention centers, that I am aware of, that are actually built and successful in and of themselves in the suburbs.

QUESTIONER: My name is Laurence Costa. How do we know that a new convention center will prosper any more than the old one? If I were a banker — and I am a banker because I am a taxpayer — and these guys are coming to me for money to build this convention center, the first thing I’d say is let’s see your financial statement. How good is it? Have you been successful? Why should I lend you money if you have not been successful with what you have done? I have never heard of a business that builds and expands and does not have any business.

SHIBLEY: Clearly, the anticipated financial return has to be better communicated. Keith, can you address that briefly?

“...We must recognize what is authentic to us and build on that. I want to be like every other damn city in the country, we’ll go build a convention center that’s transparent and all that kind of stuff. Nobody is going to care.”

– Mark Goldman

20 Questions
The north end of the existing convention center occupies what used to be a part of Genesee Street, leaving only a narrow pedestrian passageway—which some find forbidding—to connect Franklin with Pearl Street. Construction of a new convention center elsewhere would open the possibility of a partial removal of the old convention center to reestablish the link.

BELANGER: If you go back and look at the Johnson study, it suggests that the current facility, the piece of crap facility we have on Franklin Street, is generating $22 million a year in economic benefit for the community. With a new convention center it could be much more.

QUESTIONER: My name is Daniel Sack. Senator Volker, I think, was misled when he thought there was consensus. I read in the newspapers when the Cannon/SMG study came out that there was a consensus, that everybody agreed the Mohawk site was the best place to put the new convention center. In this week’s ArtVoice, Mr. Belanger, you were quoted as saying there is nothing wrong with other opinions, but that it was a little bit disappointing because there had been this very public process, where those sorts of interests and concerns had their chance to voice their opinions. I assume that was a correct quote?

BELANGER: That’s correct.

SACK: Okay, this notion has also been stated by The Buffalo News and writers to The News. Can you explain your definition of public process in light of the fact that there has still not been one public meeting about the site selection. Just what is public process if not public meetings?

BELANGER: There were representatives of private and public sector groups on the task force. In fact this gentleman here was on the task force. For whatever reason, he bailed out.

GOLDMAN: I resigned. I didn’t bail out.

BELANGER: So, there was plenty of opportunity for the various constituencies to be represented.

GEIGER: There was a public hearing at the Common Council a year-and-a-half ago and there were quite a few people there.

SHIBLEY: The issue I think one has to hear is that some feel that they’ve somehow not been invited to the table. Who gets included? How do they get included? What’s the mechanical process? Was the public hearing in the Common Council the best way to do it? These are some of the questions people have.

The issue was clearly the subject of discussion at the Summit. It is clearly a subject here. From what we read in the newspaper from the County Executive, it will be the subject for future EIS investigations in terms of the impacts of that site selection. So, there are ways for people to get involved proactively.

Part of the issue is making sure that people know when and how to get involved. We’re past our time, and I don’t want to cut this off. But I also want to acknowledge, as members of the audience begin to leave, both the gift of the panel’s time and your time. So, I would like to say my own sincere thank you to this panel for their engagement and ask them to stay on for further questions and let the audience sneak away if you like. But let’s give the panel a round of applause.

We will take these three questions. Then I will ask the panelists, each in a brief statement, to suggest what they think some of the next steps should be. Then we’ll conclude.

QUESTIONER: My name is Chuck Reader, I am the Convention facilities generate a large volume of truck traffic, with trucks sometimes driving right on to the exhibit hall floor to load or unload. A major design challenge – not well-met in the existing facility – is to provide vehicle access and maintain pedestrian amenity at the same time. A loading dock and unused visitor entrance are side-by-side at the corner of Pearl and Court Streets.

A roundtable discussion
general manager here at the Adam’s Mark Hotel, and a 1983 graduate of Marquette University, which is located in Milwaukee. When I left Milwaukee, they were in worse shape than you are here in Buffalo in the year 2000. Breweries closing, factories closing, people leaving and nothing downtown. And at that point they had the foresight to start this process and ask themselves, “What are we going to do to revitalize the downtown?” and that’s why they are in the position they are today. They didn’t have two hundred and eighty flights a day coming into the city back then. Marquette University, a college of eleven thousand people, was one of the largest employers in the city at that time. So, you know, things do change.

Also, Mark Goldman’s comment about outside investment not being appropriate for the city was wrong. Look at this hotel. This is the result of private investment from outside the city of Buffalo. Whether you like it or not, this is a catalyst for the hotel industry and hospitality industry. Welcome to private investment and welcome to what the hospitality industry can do for a city. That’s the point and I think that’s why everybody is here. We are not a proponent of the Mohawk site, don’t get me wrong here. We love the idea of the convention center. We don’t feel it’s the right site. But the convention center, in the absence of any other industry in the city right now, is the only way you’re going to get interest in this region and to get people to come in here and see what attributes you have.

I have one question, real quick. When we build a bigger convention center there will be an even greater lack of hotel rooms than there is now. You still will only have a thousand hotel rooms downtown. To get these large groups we need other hotels. Has the city made an effort to approach other hotels to come in and develop in this region?

BELANGER: Actually, I understand there are already a number of hotel developers starting to look at Buffalo. The City and the County have not talked much about hotels to date because it will take a lot less subsidy to attract new hotels once the convention center decision is settled. The ERA study does suggest there will be a need for additional hotel rooms soon after you get the facility up and running. The question is how soon do you want to put rooms in place, because the longer we can hold out the less public subsidy will be required.

NUSSBAUMER: We need new hotel rooms now. When we have a decent-sized convention we have to put people in the Holiday Inn in Fort Erie, in Niagara Falls, out at the Marriott, the Radisson out by the airport. We have so few hotel rooms in the city of Buffalo that if we had a larger convention center we’d have to put visitors up in Batavia. If you put the convention center down at the Lehigh site, you’d have room for a hotel. Adelphia is looking at a hotel down there right now. It’s a small one but it could be larger. Otherwise, we are scattering people all over the place just to find places to house them.

QUESTIONER: It seems to me the basic issue that we have is public cost. I would love to see a new convention center, especially if it was privately built and funded. Second, I didn’t hear a clear answer to the question about
re-use of the existing convention center and I am very concerned about that. I am also concerned about its possible demolition. Are we talking about asbestos concrete? But mostly we have a section of the town that is very desolate to walk by.

MENDELL: It was a secondary job of the task force to develop some alternatives for reuse of the existing center after the new one was opened. Eight or nine alternatives were suggested, including some removals to allow the re-connection of Genesee Street. But we decided that now is not the best time to make a definitive judgment about that. It may be three or four or more years before we are out of the existing convention center and circumstances then could be dramatically different. At one point, some people were excited about the idea of a casino, and a lot of people said “That’s a great use.” But it’s still too early to be that definitive.

CLOSING COMMENTS, NEXT STEPS

SHIBLEY: Now I’d like to ask each panelist to say, quickly, what they think should be the next steps in moving forward with this discussion and decision. Mark:

GOLDMAN: Well, I agree with Mr. Reader about how important outside investment is. I disagree strongly, however, that the way for this city to attract, not only dollars, but the admiration of the outside world, is to build a convention center. I think we must recognize what our natural inherent assets are. We must recognize what is authentic to us and build on that. If we want to be like every other darned city in the country, we’ll go build a convention center that’s transparent and all that kind of stuff. Nobody is going to care. It won’t hit one headline. If we make a commitment to really finding out what is real and authentic about our community, use that as a basis for downtown revitalization involving the opinions of all the people in this community, not just some guys downtown — that’s what I suggest that we do.

MENDELL: I guess I’d just like to make a personal comment. Some of you may know Cannon operates eight offices across the country: New York, Boston, Washington, Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, and also Buffalo. Candidly, as the president of the company, I could live anywhere. I am here because I have chosen to be here. There is no greater desire that I have for this region and this city than to see us rebound from the doldrums that everybody is so discouraged about. In terms of next steps, we need to move forward with this public discussion. It has been suggested that if the EIS process was kicked into gear that would be a way to give some official character to the discussion. But I would just add one caution: that the passion of somebody’s belief is not necessarily a good substitute for thoughtful decision making.

BELANGER: As part of this process, I visited several different cities, including Columbus and Milwaukee, and I was interested to hear Chuck talk about what Milwaukee was, because I know what Milwaukee is now. They built a large convention center and integrated it into the fabric of their downtown in such a way that it is a very attractive piece of architecture. They attracted retail and downtown housing in a significant way. They made their downtown vibrant. There were private parties who invested in their downtown because of the investments that the public sector had made in the convention center. I want what Milwaukee has.
CONNORS: From the convention center/ convention business standpoint, the competitive market is pulling away from Buffalo. To do nothing might be a missed opportunity. That competitive market will pull further away. However, I think, it is quite clear that your next step must be an inclusive dialogue because all of the elements that have been brought to this discussion today are going to be necessary to make this a successful, vital, and vibrant downtown and a successful city in the future.

NUSSBAUMER: This is my 63rd year of living in Buffalo. My company is in Lake George, New York. I chose to stay here. Buffalo is a fantastic city. Our group is looking at things two ways: number one, do we need a new convention center? Number two, if indeed it is going to come to Buffalo, let us put it in an area that has been touted so much, the waterfront area, where the Adelphia-Cordish people are looking at putting buildings down there, connecting the convention center to the arena, the DL&W, and the Adelphia complex. You would have a very viable area. The alternative is, I believe, just destroying more of downtown Buffalo. Maybe we should put $150 million into 75 medium to small-sized projects in the middle of downtown Buffalo and put our own citizens, who are here seven days a week, back in the streets.

GEIGER: Mark, you talk about the city. We should be real and authentic. You've talked about values and history and heritage and architecture. I agree. But why can't a city have all those things and have a vibrant convention industry as well? Think about Boston, Philly, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Milwaukee. They're all real and authentic. They have heritage and history. But they have strong convention industries as well. You can do both. I challenge anyone to name a vibrant city that does not have an active convention center helping to drive the economy. We talked a lot about a lot of different cities today, but to see real convention tourism working, you do not have to go any further than Niagara Falls, Ontario, twenty minutes north of here. They are building a world-class year-round tourist destination. They are capitalizing on the great assets of this marketplace. We can do the same here. We can capitalize on the travel industry if we build a convention center that will complement what's going on up there, and that will build our economy. The convention industry has a proven track record of doing that.

SHIBLEY: Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to finish with a kind of benediction if I might. May we not be a victim of our history even as we build on our history. May we learn from the experience of others even as we don't allow those experiences to tell us what Buffalo is. And may we maintain and build on a commitment to an open and public discussion of the issues before us.

"May we learn from the experience of others even as we don't allow those experiences to tell us what Buffalo is. And may we maintain and build on a commitment to an open and public discussion of the issues before us."

– Robert G. Shibley

The Rhode Island Convention Center in Providence offers facilities similar to those proposed for Buffalo: a 100,000 square foot exhibition hall; maximum seating capacity of 9,000; additional meeting space of 37,000 square feet; and banquet capacity of 1,350. The facility in Providence is connected to the 363-room Westin Providence Hotel and 2,400-space parking garage.

Thank you to the panel and to the audience.