

Build a Stadium Downtown and They Will Come

By James Barsby

On March 7th 2017, the Council of the City of Greater Sudbury approved the decision to move forward (Keown 2017) with a new 5,800-seat ice-only arena at a price tag of \$100 million – much of which to be financed internally by the city through taxpayer dollars (Henderson 2017). The new arena would result in the Sudbury Wolves (an OHL hockey team) moving from their current home in downtown Sudbury, the Sudbury Community Arena, to a suburban location which some hope will create a new commercial hub in Sudbury (True North Strong Event Centre 2017).

The decision to move the Sudbury arena leads to a number of important questions about sports stadiums and cities, such as: what models for stadium location exist, what is the industry standard in stadium location, and what is best for the City of Greater Sudbury?



Proposed Design of the True North Strong Centre

Source: truenorthstrong.info

Research for this piece resulted in the identification of three models for the location of sports arenas: the suburban stadium, the mixed model and the downtown arena.

The suburban model, for example the Canadian Tire Centre in Kanata (a suburb of Ottawa) features a stadium in a suburb outside of a large metropolitan city (CTC 2017). This model was originally popularized in the 1970s, as members of the upper and middle classes - those with the time and money to spend enjoying leisure activities like sports and concerts migrated from cities out to the suburbs (Noll & Zimbalist 1997). Although less common in recent years, suburban stadiums still exist, and more are being created. In 2017, the Atlanta Braves moved from their downtown Turner Field to SunTrust Park in Cobb County, a suburb of Atlanta (ESPN 2013). Overall however, the suburban model is no longer the arena industry standard and the Braves appear to be an exception to the norm. While there is no unanimous

reason for the transition away from the suburban, sports journalism has certainly championed the change (Garrioch 2016).

The mixed model is a relatively new and increasingly popular model where an arena is placed in a neighbourhood outside of the downtown core, but is accompanied by a small commerce park. The mixed model has been used in Ottawa in the TD Place Stadium in Lansdowne Park, a suburb of Ottawa (TD Place 2017). In this case, when the stadium was renovated, the surrounding area was reinvigorated with restaurants, entertainment, shopping and a redesigned park. As this is a more recent model for stadium location, there is little research available on the implications of this set up. That being said, the new Sudbury arena's would appear to fall into this model with the True North Strong Centre which would create a new stadium outside of the downtown core, and be surrounded by a range of other services, including entertainment facilities, hotels, restaurants, shopping, a commerce park, and a festival area (TNSEC 2017).



Proposed Site Map of True North Strong Centre

Source: <http://truenorthstrong.info/2017/01/26/proposed-sudbury-arena-showpiece-northern-ontario/>

Finally, the downtown model places the arena in the downtown or central business district of a city - as illustrated by the Air Canada Centre in Toronto (ACC 2017). This was the traditional model for stadiums construction that was largely abandoned with the movement of individuals out of cities and into the suburbs (Noll & Zimbalist 1997). However, it has returned as the stadium standard in recent years (Noll & Zimbalist 1997). The return to downtown has been apparent through a number of cases including the Edmonton Oilers moving from the suburban Northlands Coliseum to the downtown Roger Arena in 2016 (Garrioch 2016). More recently, the Detroit Pistons moved into the downtown Little Caesars Arena from their arena in Auburn Hills, Michigan. Prior to the move, the Pistons were the only NBA team not located "within the urban city they represent" (Winfield 2016). Perhaps most significantly, the largest OHL stadium, the FirstOntario Centre in Hamilton (Core Entertainment 2017), and the most recently built stadium, the Meridian Centre in St. Catharines, are both located downtown (Meridian Centre 2017).

The downtown stadium model has become the norm in the North American sports arena industry for several key reasons. First, downtown stadiums play a role in revitalizing the economy of a downtown core as they create a cycle that attracts visits and investment to the downtown. As more visitors are attracted for events, businesses are more likely to set up shop in the area. With more businesses, visitors are more willing to spending time and money prior to attending their event (Rosentraub

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2009). Suburban stadiums often do not grow the surrounding economy, as visitors typically travel to the stadium solely for their event and do not spend additional time or money. As many stadiums are partially funded by tax dollars, cities should seek to ensure that their stadium will be a tool for economic development of the surrounding area. (Nunn & Rosentraub 1997).

Second, downtown stadiums enhance the image of a municipality and are a factor that can encourage residents to live in the city rather than suburban neighbourhoods. In addition, accessibility is key to visitor rates, as people can make use of city transport to access a downtown stadium where they typically cannot for a suburban arena (Trendafilova et al. 2012).

Thirdly, downtown stadiums tend to attract a wider array of non-sports related events (i.e. concerts and conferences) than suburban arenas, as the downtown population and businesses encourage the success of a wide range of events (Yates 2009). Finally, having multiple stadiums in a relatively small geographic area can cause booking confusion for non-sports events which can result in the performers sidestepping the venues altogether to avoid losing revenue. Touring events may avoid an area for fear of losing a share of market by booking in the wrong venue for the region. This was demonstrated by the city of Kamloops, British Columbia, as they built a stadium in 1993 and the nearby Kelowna built a stadium in 1999. Kamloops suffered fewer visitors and events with the creation of the Kelowna stadium and Kelowna's never had the same success as Kamloops. (Mason et al. 2007).

To conclude, the downtown stadium has been the dominant format for sports arenas in recent years as they provide economic and community benefits to the city that suburban and mixed model stadiums simply cannot achieve. Indeed, downtown stadiums are also the norm in the OHL, with 6 out of 7 arenas built since 2000 residing in the core of their respective cities. The City of Greater Sudbury should consider all of the potential benefits and implications of the various models of stadium location before committing to their final decision and potentially, wasting tax dollars.

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