

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

STADIUM INDECISION UNDER FIRE

Classic Founder Wants City To Do Something Already

Southern Heritage Classic founder Fred Jones on Friday criticized the City of Memphis for letting yet another year pass without deciding the fate of the 42-year-old Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium.

We're still having the same conversation, three and a half, going on four years later," he said. "All the studies have been done. The only thing that's changed is that the cost has escalated." Jones, who has been largely silent on the stadium issue, broke that silence in a lengthy interview during which he also said his stadium lease has expired and the city is stalling his attempts at negotiating a new one - thus harming potential new sponsorship deals.

Also, Jones is urging the city and the county to keep the Mid-South Coliseum open - and said he'd like to manage the arena in what he called "probably a lifelong dream." On the stadium front, this year has been taken up with Mayor Willie Herenton's New Year's Day call for a new Mid-South Fairgrounds stadium, and the ensuing debate over whether that or a Liberty Bowl renovation is the best course.

But Jones said such talk - and little action - has been going on for several years now. In April 2004, for example, a facility assessment performed by architectural and engineering firms said the stadium was "fast approaching obsolescence" and may not have been worth the \$115 million-plus renovation it needed.

Instead, the city opted for a three-year, \$15 million improvement plan - such as new locker rooms and multipurpose/media rooms - remain on hold while the city decides whether to renovate or replace the Liberty Bowl. "At some point we're going to have to make a decision," Jones said.

His comments came a day after AutoZone Liberty Bowl executive director Steve Ehrhart also urged the city to act, saying: "We've got to make the decision and get moving forward, one way or another." Ehrhart tempered his statements somewhat, however, saying the city seemed to feel a sense of urgency. "I can understand the frustration. I know what everyone is saying," said Cato Johnson, chairman of the committee overseeing fairgrounds re-use, of which the stadium is a major piece.

But he said there are reasons for the current delays, from waiting on a U.S. Department of Justice mandate on Americans with Disabilities Act improvements at the Liberty Bowl to the University of Memphis' feasibility study of an on-campus football stadium. It's not known when the former could come, although DOJ officials inspected the stadium and attended a game last month. The U of M feasibility study is expected in February. "I think they'll finish theirs first (before the city makes a stadium decision)," Johnson said of the U of M.

Robert Lipscomb, the city's project manager for the stadium issue and fairground redevelopment, said the process is moving "expeditiously," but added, "I think we can't go full blast until we hear from the Department of Justice in regards to the whole ADA issue. I don't know what more we can do at this point." He said it's his understanding the DOJ report could arrive "fairly imminently," but that "you can't control the Department of Justice."



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So, now, the city awaits the DOJ's word on ADA compliance at the Liberty Bowl. Several months ago, the focus was more on a new stadium. A draft report of a national consultant's report, released by the city in September, favored a new stadium but said paying for it would be a challenge "given the sheer volume of costs involved" and the city's "other pressing needs" and "limited" resources.

The draft report by Conventions, Sports & Leisure International favored a new fairgrounds stadium (two options priced at \$187.4 million or \$217.5 million) over repairs to the Liberty Bowl (two options priced at \$21.5 million or \$265.1 million).

Jones said he would like a new stadium -- but it would need to be first-class and financially viable. In the short term, Jones' more pressing concern is getting a stadium lease, since his runs out this year, along with those of other tenants. He said the lack of a lease is "holding up a lot of potential big deals" with sponsors, and that the city has given him "no real explanation" for its unwillingness to negotiate. Ehrhart, asked if he's concerned about the lack of a lease beyond 2007, said, "I would say it's important we get these long-term leases in place."

Cindy Buchanan, city parks director, downplayed the issue. "They're all major tenants and we want them to stay, and we'll be sitting down and working with them on contracts for next year and the next group of years." Jones' idea for operating the Coliseum, meanwhile, appears to be a tough sell. "We've got to look out for the taxpayer," Lipscomb said. "Even if you find the dollars for renovation, what events can you have there that are going to generate a profit?"

Fairgrounds wish list

Fred Jones, Southern Heritage Classic founder and veteran of the local sports and entertainment scene, offers his views on stadium and fairgrounds issues:

If a new stadium is built: It should have at least 50,000 seats, all with chairbacks, including 10,000 club seats. It should have suites with a higher level of luxury than in the Liberty Bowl, improved scoreboard and high-tech video screens, and first-class concession areas.

If the Liberty Bowl is renovated: Major areas for improvement include locker rooms; luxury suites; media, interview and TV production areas.

Elsewhere on the grounds: Tear down old buildings, especially the area around Libertyland, but leave the Mid-South Coliseum -- and consider Jones and his staff to manage the arena.