

editor's message



It's Time: Expand the Convention Center

Bloomington needs a larger convention center.

To the city government and the local business community, this is a no-brainer. More people at the convention center means more guests in our hotels and more customers at our local shops, bars, and restaurants.

Our locally owned stores especially need help. They are battling the internet, big-box stores, and, to a lesser extent, competition from Indianapolis.

On a regular basis, the convention center staff receives overtures from meeting planners wanting to bring trade shows, conventions, and association meetings here. Thousands of visitors. But they are turned away because our convention center is too small.

People want to come here because of Bloomington's excellent reputation as a diverse cultural, entertainment, culinary, and sports destination. We have everything to offer larger delegations—everything except space for their gatherings.

The arguments against enlarging the convention center are mainly two-fold and have to do with the creation of a 1 percent food-and-beverage tax to help pay for it.

The first objection comes from many who live outside the city, in Monroe County, who are resistant to the tax because they feel the center only benefits downtown Bloomington. They concede that many people in the county work in the city and jobs will be created, but they believe these will be primarily low-paying jobs in fast-food restaurants. This is a misconception for several reasons. One thing to consider is that people attending a convention or trade show don't want to eat at the same chain restaurants they can frequent at home—they want to sample local fare. On the other side of the equation, many of our local restaurateurs pride themselves on sourcing food locally, an economic benefit to our many regional small farmers.

There are two other very important considerations. Attendees at conventions often bring their spouses. If

2,000 attendees are here for four days, there may be something like 1,500 others attending with them, and they will need things to do. Prior to arriving, they have the opportunity to sign up for companion programs and pay for them in advance. These programs could include tours and activities of every imaginable kind—art classes, athletic activities, theatrical and musical performances, yoga sessions, lectures, hikes, wine tastings, afternoon teas. These programs will spawn new businesses all across the county, and create jobs.

A second consideration: At trade shows, the companies that rent booths are all vying for the attention of the attendees who have come to see their wares and hear about their services. In addition to whatever evening programs might be going on at the convention center, many of these companies will hold their own lavish parties, creating even more jobs for musicians, caterers, florists, event planners, party supply vendors, and skilled workers.

The second objection to expanding the convention center is that the 1 percent food-and-beverage tax will be a harsh burden on low-income residents. While I am sensitive to the struggles faced by these individuals and families, the tax is small and does not apply to groceries. Even if a single parent were to take two children for dinner at McDonald's at a cost of \$20, the tax would only add 20 cents to the bill.

Back in the day, you could buy something for 20 cents. Today, you can't even get a gumball out of a vending machine for that amount. The only thing I know of that you can purchase for 20 cents today is 12 minutes in a downtown parking meter.

For future prosperity and for job growth, a larger convention center will be a boon to Bloomington and to all of Monroe County. It's time.

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