

November 29, 2022

The Honorable Mayor Brad Cavanagh  
& Members of the City Council

**Re: Potential Five Flags Capital Project**

Dear Mayor Cavanagh and City Council Members:

This letter relates to a recent proposal by City Manager Mike Van Milligen regarding approximately 24 million dollars in urban renewal debt capacity that may be available to the Five Flags Center in the next few years. At two recent meetings, Mr. Van Milligen discussed with the Dubuque Five Flags Civic Center Commission how this funding could greatly improve the customers' and entertainers' experiences at Five Flags Center. Mr. Van Milligen also provided us with answers to our questions and the dialogue was open and educational.

The Commission has conducted a free flowing and serious discussion regarding Mr. Van Milligen's proposal and the Commission strongly supports investing approximately 24 million dollars in urban renewal debt capacity into the Five Flags Center. This funding proposal appears realistic, innovative and is an excellent first step to greatly improving the arena and the historic theater.

Creating a dual use facility by constructing an outdoor event plaza area north of the arena is an idea that has been discussed by the Commission in the past. The Kemba Live in Columbus, Ohio and Stage AE in Pittsburg Pennsylvania are examples of this unique venue model. *See* the attached summary of the dual use facility. Constructing a dual use facility using Five Flags Center's current structure has been conceptually proposed at 35 million dollars (10 million dollars more than the City Manager's funding proposal). Because the Commission has high hopes for converting the Five Flags Center into a dual use facility in the future, the Commission supports utilizing the 24 million dollars on updates to the Five Flag Center that would not preclude or inhibit the construction of a dual use facility down the road.

The Commission supports investing 24 million dollars into the Five Flags Center. From day one, it has always been the Commission's goal to provide an entertainment center and theater that our community can be proud of and that will serve as a destination venue in the Midwest.

Sincerely,  
Five Flags Civic Center Commission  
Rod Bakke, Chair  
Bryce Parks, Vice Chair  
McKenzie Blau  
Brenda Christner

cc: Michael C. Van Milligen, City Manager  
Marie L. Ware, Leisure Services Manager  
Attachment

A revised vision for Five Flags: A venue we need and a budget we can justify.

Proposal by Bryce Parks from conceptual plans started by HR Cook and Five Flags Staff.

As we submit our wholehearted support for applying the \$24 million to bringing Five Flags to a new and much needed place for our community, I would like to introduce a plan we had been working on. While we do not expect this plan to happen in its entirety immediately, I ask you to look at what can be and how this current investment of \$24 million can be done in a way that steps us toward this longer term end goal, bringing the upgrades we desperately need, but in a way that leaves the door open to something wonderful.

When costs elevated to near \$100 Million dollars for the preferred Option 4 of the proposed new Five Flags Arena, staff and commission members saw the writing on the wall before the project was officially shelved in 2021. But despite the loss of the desired end goal, those who were fighting to see the venue find a new and vital life in downtown Dubuque did not stop looking for new solutions, taking in community sentiment, realistic financials, and looking for a fresh and creative approach to what was feared to be a dream that was slipping away. With the news that the City Council and City Manager have opened a door to a possible \$24 million investment in Five Flags, it's time to make sure that those leaders who set the vision for the future are aware of an exciting vision for the future that they have until now, not been aware of.

When you find out what's impossible, you have to discover what IS possible.

The City Manager mentioned the idea of a dual use facility that could play indoor or outdoor. Then-General Manager HR Cook began researching such facilities elsewhere in America. He found some promising opportunities to complete a renovation of Five Flags that not only addressed the capacity and amenity upgrade needs of the facility, but did so in a stunningly, financially frugal manner while introducing a new model for civic centers that would serve as a model for other communities to emulate.

Using the facilities Kemba Live in Columbus, OH and Stage AE in Pittsburgh, PA as examples, the plan is as simple as it is ingenious. Without tearing down what we have, the current structure can be augmented to serve two stages, one indoor facing a north stage as it often does now, and one that opens the wall behind the stage to serve a beautiful amphitheater park across 5th Street to host concerts, festivals and more. The outdoor stage would utilize permanent stage, light, sound and projection screens that power the stage no matter the set-up. Parks grants for turning asphalt into green space again can be a target for additional funding.

The plan begins with moving the North wall of Five Flags out about 20 feet toward 5th Street. The street could remain open for one lane of westbound traffic. This expands the footprint of the existing arena to accommodate more space. About 60-feet at the center of the wall would open with movable doors to allow performances to play out to the open air. Automated bollards can close off the remaining 5th Street to traffic for these shows, using that street space as up front VIP seating or standing room with a terraced park-like amphitheater setting behind it. Both the inside and outside of the building would have giant projection screens on each side of the stage that can be served by a simple two-camera set-up to make every seat in the house an up-close-and-personal experience for each show. A permanent steel canopy is pre-rigged for sound and lights and also serves as an attractive architectural element to the re-imagined building exterior. The entire building would also get an exterior wrap or facelift to make it more modern or better fit the neighborhood.

Inside the arena, the old bleachers at the East (Main St) and West (Locust St.) sides of the area are removed and an approximately 40 foot wide section of that space is infilled with amenities critical to the function of the facility. The West (Locust St.) side, would house support services that serve the show itself including catering, dressing rooms, showers, production rooms, load-in storage, and "backstage" needs.

The load-in door would move from the East end of 5th Street to the west end of the same side of the building. Support parking for the buses and semis from the touring shows would be where the gas station

used to be, directly across from the new load-in door, in addition to parking behind the Post Office along 5th Street.

On the East Side, that 40 foot-plus space is infilled with customer service amenities that would serve both indoor and outdoor shows. No more festival porta potties. Bathrooms, concessions, and bar area would be accessed from the ends. This could also house a small kitchen.

New seating (NOT bleachers, real seats) would be built on top of these built out areas, 40 feet deep and they would step up to the upper mezzanine, allowing for a walkway around the arena to access those seats, the first floor balcony, and the amenities on that upper mezzanine behind the main (existing) arena seats. Telescoping seats could then also extend out in front of those new built-in areas to extend the new seats to the floor. Thus, the reason to access the amenities beneath from the ends. Those telescoping seats could remain retracted to allow for wider floor standing or floor seats, giving the venue a more eclectic feel similar to the exciting new Sylvee entertainment venue in Madison, only larger. With more seating on 3 sides, many shows would likely not need floor seating, opting for GA standing, especially for shows appealing to younger audiences.

The center entrance (Gate B) to the floor of the arena from the concourse, currently not used for shows, would become the main entrance and Gate C (Main Street side) would be an entrance, though restructured to add more restrooms. The existing dressing rooms on the Main Street side would be taken out to accommodate more bar areas and restrooms. The locker rooms under the current seats would be removed and replaced, once again, with restrooms and potential concessions, greatly expanding the access and amount of those facilities, which is a high priority for show attendees. Gate A (Locust) access into the arena from the concourse would be eliminated to accommodate the extensive needs of the support services build-out. The box office entrance to the concourse from Locust Street would remain.

What was formerly the “party zone” for hockey games and now is primarily storage, the upper mezzanine open area at the southeast corner of the arena, can become a unique bar area with views of the stage and easy access to the new seats above the East end build-outs. Underutilized mezzanine space space by Gate G (southwest corner outside the arena) could become expanded bar space and the Orpheum Room could become a private lounge.

Former broadcasting and scorekeeper booths behind the last row of main seats could be transformed into 2 private suites. Those suites, as well as the newly opened upper level seats in the Five Flags Theater would be accessible from a renovated elevator in its current location, serving the facility on the Theater side of the upper mezzanine, with a skywalk to the arena. These suites can be fairly easily served with catering from the new kitchen under the East side seats.

The entire arena venue would now feel more intimate, with seats closer to and above the stage. It's an eclectic arena feel that most have not experienced before. A show of 500 could feel as intimate as a show of 4500. And with a removable raised stage inside the building, the set-up would still allow for a full-sized basketball court, rodeo set-up, sports tournaments, and other arena style shows that are already popular in the venue. So, the Five Flags Arena would remain a multi-function space.

Capacity would stay approximately the same or increase, but there is a significant improvement. All seats would be fixed and not bleachers. Bleacher seating is one of the biggest areas of customer complaint in the current venue and the reason bleacher shows are avoided as much as possible.

Upgrades to the Theater would remain in line with what was planned for Option 2 of the proposed renovations, which include access to the arena mezzanine bathrooms from the theater, as well as opening up the top level of the balcony to seating with elevator access. That would give the venue 900-950 seats instead of 750 and allow for a new level of acts to consider the venue while touring.

Architect David Geisel, who also designed the Grand River Center, toured the facility to help envision how the space could incorporate all of these amenities and upgrades. He is known for his arena and larger venue designs. Though his assessment was a ballpark figure, he estimated the cost to turn Five Flags

Arena into this kind of facility to be roughly \$30-35 million. Not \$68 or 92 million, the numbers that were at times associated with Option 4. This new estimate did not include the renovations to the Theater. With a possible infusion of \$24 million into possible upgrades to Five Flags, this very modern, eclectic and enviable civic venue is within reach from that base investment.

This design gives up very little from what was desired of Option 4. It does so at 1/3 the cost and it elevates the whole project in an incredible way to open downtown Dubuque up to an array of outdoor entertainment and cultural opportunities. It takes all the pressure off downtown and closing Main Street at the Town Clock for events. It opens up revenue production for summer shows because people don't want to be inside in the Summer and thus show booking drops way off that time of year. And if it rains, you turn around and put it inside.

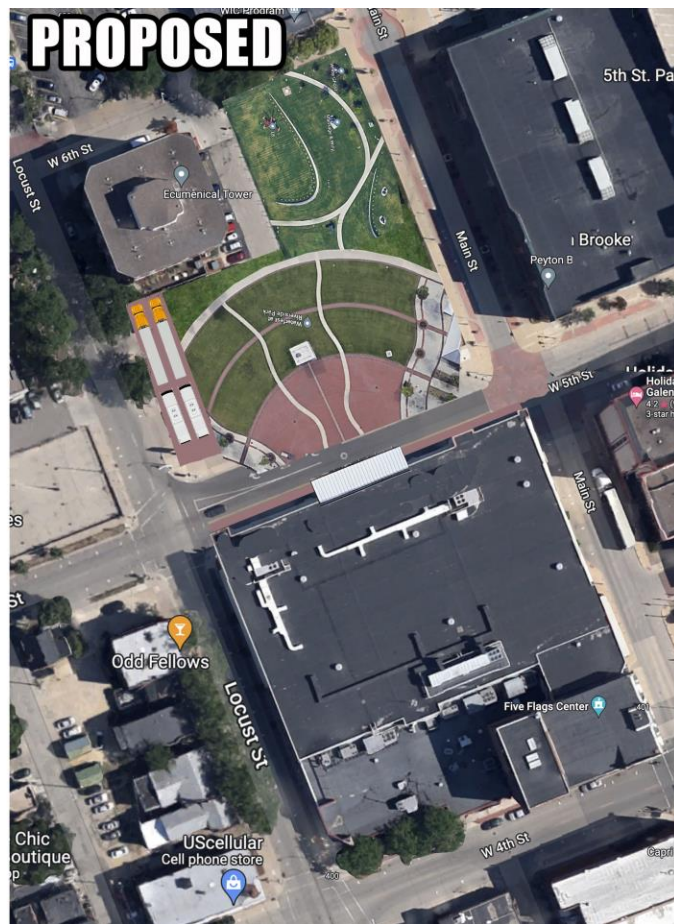
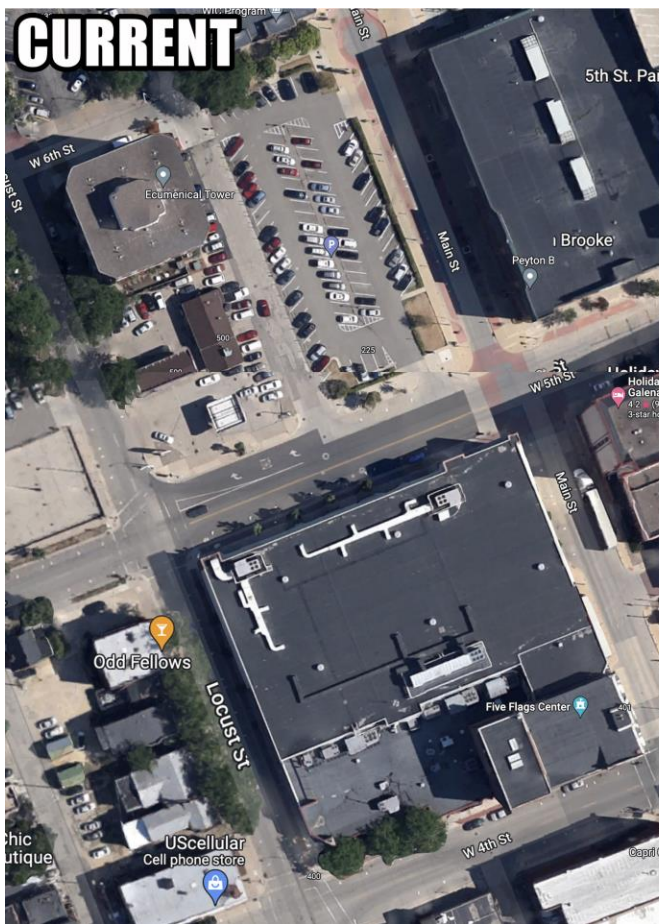
Also, with built-in sound and lights, upwards of \$10,000 could be saved per show. When a band and a promoter see that they can save thousands of dollars on your venue vs another venue, you book more shows and everyone makes more money. More accessible bathrooms and concessions means higher per-cap concession sales on every show as well, directly benefiting the venue's bottom line.

When I realized the potential, I got excited on a level I didn't even have for Option 4. I believe we would be a destination venue. One that other cities are already wanting to do, but we have things they don't have. We have the land and an existing building to modify. Other communities have to start from scratch making it cost-prohibitive. We're potentially in a perfect place to leverage the existing structure to make it a reality on a shoestring budget, compared to starting over. I feel the creativity and vision in this forward-looking idea, driven by need and cost-consciousness, is an amazing revelation for what may have been a dream lost. I hope you agree that it is our chance to reclaim that dream and do so in a way we didn't realize was even possible.

Many of the changes that would need to occur inside the building to step toward this long-range goal could be accomplished under the current proposed \$24 budget. Obviously, moving the wall out, opening it up and converting a parking lot to an amphitheater would be a part 2 for a later date. But a part 2 that might carry a \$10-15 million price tag (before private investment, naming rights, etc. are factored in). Not a 50 million dollar cost.

Please also reference to attached images to help you see how it works in the the real world. There really are no interior comparables to show as that part of the renovation would truly be unique in America, and that part could happen with the \$24 million.

Thank you for your time and vision.





**STAGE AE  
PITTSBURGH, PA**



**KEMBA LIVE, COLUMBUS, OH**