

The Columbus Dispatch

Nationwide Arena trails competitors in spending on renovations

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Posted Jun 24, 2018 at 11:30 AM

Updated Jun 24, 2018 at 11:43 AM

While Columbus and Franklin County try to figure out how they will pay for the annual upkeep at Nationwide Arena, similar venues across the country are spending tens of millions — and, in some cases, hundreds of millions — of dollars on major updates.

Local officials have said they think Nationwide Arena was well-built and could last until 2040 if the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority can spend \$4 million a year on updates to the 18-year-old facility. But the authority doesn't have the money to pay for them.

At the same time, owners and operators of some of the arenas that sprang up across the country during a building boom in the mid-1990s and early 2000s already are spending big to change their facilities.

"Certainly, every time somebody else builds a new arena or renovates an arena, we look and feel just a little bit older. It's just the nature of everything," said Xen Riggs, CEO of Columbus Arena Management.

Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland opened six years before Nationwide and is in the middle of a \$140 million update scheduled to be finished in 2019.

Of the 19 National Hockey League arenas built within five years of Nationwide, three are in the middle of or have completed renovations of more than \$60 million, the threshold Riggs said arena operators consider a major face-lift. Nine more have spent at least \$10 million on a renovation project, according to Dispatch research.

When an industry group of arena operators polled members about how much they were spending annually on capital improvements, Riggs said Nationwide ranked last.

The arena's capital-improvement plan calls for a new scoreboard in 2021 and a new roof in 2022 at a cost of \$5 million each. But operators already have raided the rainy-day fund to pay for new chillers this summer, leaving little money for future improvements.

"Those are, I would say, incremental improvements. They're small in comparison," said Don Brown, executive director of the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority.

Money for capital improvements is scarce because casino-tax receipts have not met expectations laid out when the city and county agreed to use them to buy the arena, prop up operations and pay for updates in 2012.

The facilities authority is working with the Greater Columbus Arts Council to persuade city officials to approve a ticket tax and county officials to dedicate sales-tax funding to pay for arts programs and to provide the \$4 million a year the arena needs for upkeep.

Riggs said local officials have discussed large renovations that could benefit the arena.

For example, as security has tightened in the arena, long lines stretch outside entrances, sometimes leaving attendees in the rain or cold. Putting those areas under a roof and creating hospitality space or adding entrances at the northern corners of the building were part of that "brainstorming," he said.

Many arena renovation projects across the country have a common goal: to make the game-day experience live up to modern expectations.

Traditional concession stands and seating options are inadequate for today's fans, said Geoff Cheong, an architect at Populous, a firm that designs arenas and stadiums around the world.

Action on the ice or court sometimes is the secondary reason for why people attend events, said Ryan Sickman, director of sports and convention centers for Gensler, the architectural firm behind Quicken Loans Arena's renovations.

"What an NHL fan in Columbus wants isn't the same that they expect in D.C. or Las Vegas," he said. "They're different people, and their expectations are different. ... We need to be designing arenas and venues around that."

Many of the renovation projects throughout North America are designed to increase variety — modernizing concession offerings to include healthy and local options, infusing more technology throughout the venue, including better Wi-Fi and new scoreboards, and expanding the number of seating options.

Cheong said one of the most important pieces to renovation projects is creating "neighborhood" spaces in venues.

That could mean expanding concourses to establish better places for fans to gather before, during or after games. Or it could include club experiences in which fans aren't sitting in typical stadium chairs.

Cheong said he doesn't think there is a set life cycle for an arena, but experts generally agree it is estimated to be about 25 to 30 years.

Major infrastructure pieces, such as heating and cooling and other mechanical systems, start breaking down at that point. Lease terms between teams and arena owners sometimes dictate arena lifespans, too.

"Every major-league team in the country, either at the arena or stadium level, wants to start replacing their stadium starting at about 20 years, said Victor Matheson, a professor who studies arena deals at the College of the Holy Cross. "Whether they need to replace their stadium or arena at 20 years is a totally different question."

Nationwide Arena has a blend of two arena styles: one in which the concourse is tucked behind seats with tunnel access, and another that is more open. That puts it in a good position for a future renovation, Sickman said.

“The bones of the building are good,” Brown said. “We ought to get 40 years of useful life out of it if we can keep the finishes up and continue to replace the other things that are important to fans.”

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