

The Columbus Dispatch

Opinion

Editorial: Healthy arts, arena are worth ticket fee

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Columbus became a two-bowl city when Nationwide Arena opened in 2000, and leaders still haven't worked out a way for it to stay afloat without public money. Two new developments — a new debt-forgiveness plan for the arena and a proposed ticket surcharge on most sporting and cultural events in town — could move the arena closer to self-sufficiency.

The ticket surcharge the Greater Columbus Arts Council is asking Columbus City Council to impose is being pitched as a way to provide stable funding for the arts, and indeed the proposal is for most of the revenue to go to arts groups. But it also calls for some to go to the arena for capital improvements.

Taxpayers weary of the arena's seemingly endless money woes might look less favorably on a ticket tax for it than for the arts. But a surcharge would be a true user fee, meaning it wouldn't be imposed on anyone who doesn't go to concerts, games or other events.

Another part of GCAC's idea — for Franklin County to donate more tax money each year — is more problematic.

Major arenas are a financial challenge for any mid-major-sized city like Columbus. They bring fun things to town and they boost economic development, but they're expensive to maintain and they can't attract enough events to cover their own bills.

Columbus' problem is bigger because, thanks to a mid-1990s power struggle between the city and Ohio State University that wasn't resolved neatly, the city has two arenas — Nationwide and the Schottenstein Center — fishing from the same pool of attractions.

After a money-losing decade, the arena's original owners, Nationwide Insurance and Dispatch Publishing Co., which at the time owned The Dispatch, sold the arena in 2011 to the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority, which is controlled by the city and county governments.

The authority paid for the arena with a \$43.3 million loan from a division of Nationwide and a \$10 million loan from the state. The city and county rightly pledged not to spend any general-fund tax revenue on the arena. Instead, under the plan, both governments set aside a portion of their tax take from the state's four casinos to go to the arena.

But the casinos have brought in far less revenue than planners hoped, and the authority hasn't been able to keep up with scheduled maintenance, let alone big renovation projects or paying back the state and Nationwide.

On Monday, the authority's board approved a new deal under which the state will forgive some of its loan in exchange for Ohio-tourism advertising at events held in the Greater Columbus Convention Center and other venues controlled by the authority.

That helps a bit, but the arena needs more revenue.

With the arts council's request, city council faces two questions: Does a financially healthier arts-and-cultural scene justify asking people to pay more for tickets? And does Nationwide Arena bring enough benefit to the community to deserve a cut?

Considering what the arts and the arena contribute to Columbus' civic life and economy, we consider the surcharge idea reasonable.