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Nassau Coliseum's long shadow of bad dealings

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The words above the Nassau County executive's signature seemed to ring in a new era of hope for the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum and all that surrounded it:

"In full bloom, therefore, the Coliseum and its ancillary facilities will put Long Island on the international scene as it has never been ... "

The year was 1972, and the county executive was Republican Ralph G. Caso, celebrating the dedication of the new public facility and the "nation's top conventions" he said it was sure to attract.

Those hopes are alive again in the redevelopment plan from Charles Wang and his Lighthouse Development Group for the Coliseum. But through public management and private contracts, the facility has been a political albatross, a magnet for accusations of fiscal mismanagement, cronyism and shady dealings.

And if the Lighthouse group completes its renovation of the site by 2011, it will be saddled with the same lease the county has battled for almost 30 years.

When the Coliseum opened in 1972, the Republican-controlled county government awarded a no-bid concession contract to a prominent GOP contributor. In annual audits beginning in 1973, that vendor was found to have underpaid the county.

That wasn't the only way the Coliseum was losing money. Its 1973 operating deficit topped \$1 million, and minority-party politicians started complaining about overstaffing and inadequate upkeep. A bipartisan citizens' advisory committee called the county's management "cumbersome and inefficient."

When Frances Purcell, a Republican, became county executive in 1978, he began looking for a private company to help stanch the red ink, which had cost the county more than \$5 million.

The winner, under a contract largely arranged by then-Hempstead Presiding Supervisor Alfonse D'Amato, was Hyatt Management Corp. D'Amato told Newsday the five-year lease, which included options to extend for 25 more years, would net the county \$500,000 per year within four years.

At the time, Newsday reported the deal appeared more advantageous to the management company than comparable leases at other arenas.

The expected turnaround never came. In 1979, the facility operated at a deficit of \$241,000. The next year, that figure was \$195,000. After two more years of losses, Purcell was ready to revoke the contract,

alleging sloppy maintenance and a failure to make a good-faith effort at profitability.

Then-Hempstead Supervisor Thomas Gulotta threatened to "draw a line" with the contractor if things didn't improve.

But in 1986, the year before Gulotta took office as county executive, Purcell extended the lease for the contractor - by then called Spectator Management Group - to 2015.

Step by step

Plans call for building the proposal in three phases.

STAGE 1 Coliseum area

Construction of the Coliseum could begin as early as July 2009 and be completed within five to seven years.

The core area would include housing, hotel, retail uses and a canal.

STAGE 2 Housing

Residential housing, including luxury, active adult, multifamily and next-generation housing on top of parking decks. Would also include some retail.

STAGE 3 Office

Office development and parking, up to 175 feet tall.

Dreaming big

Some major projects on Long Island became reality:

LIE

Levittown

...while others never got off the ground:

Bridge to Connecticut

Shoreham nuclear plant

How big is it?

Comparison of key features of The Lighthouse at Long Island

Project's feature: 150 acres of land in the development plan

That's roughly... : Equal to the area of Montauk Downs State Park

Project's feature: 17,211 parking spots

That's roughly... : Twice that of Citi Field, the Mets' new stadium

Project's feature: 20,000 fan capacity in the Coliseum

That's roughly... : Less than one-third of Yankee Stadium

Project's feature: 313,000 square feet of convention space

That's roughly... : One-third that of Javits Convention Center in Manhattan

Project's feature: 2.6 million square feet of office space

That's roughly... : Equal to the office space of the Empire State Building

Project's feature: 500,000 square feet of retail space

That's roughly... : Two-thirds that of Tanger Outlet Center in Riverhead

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