

Center court for Memphis

As talks on a new Sacramento arena inch ahead, those involved are looking at a Southern city's facility as a model

By Mary Lynne Vellinga -- Bee Staff Writer

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POSSIBLE ARENA SITE IN SACRAMENTO: The Union Pacific railyard, looking toward Old Sacramento and the Sacramento River, is seen as the ideal place to locate a stadium that ties together with the downtown area. Sacramento Bee/Bryan Patrick

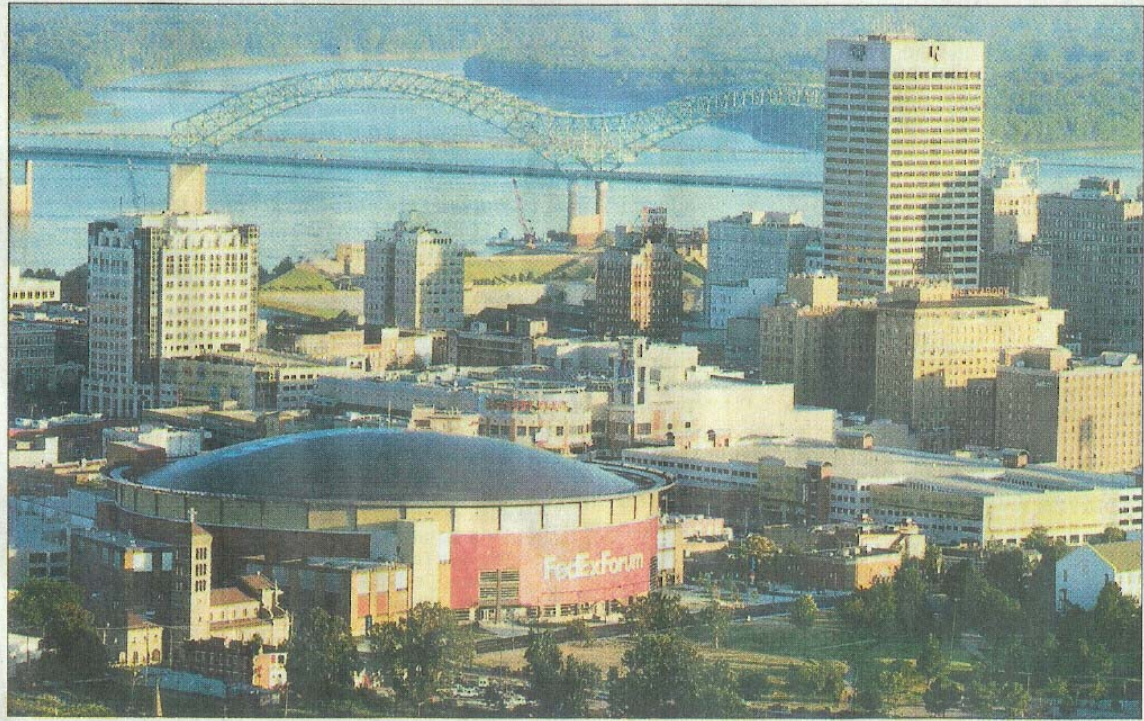
NBA fans attending a game in Memphis, Tenn., can stretch out their legs a bit farther than their counterparts in Sacramento. They sit on cushioned seats, not hard plastic. They can see the court better.

Those buying more expensive tickets gain access to private "club level" restaurants. Some get to set their drinks on granite countertops in front of executive-style chairs.

These are some of the attributes that drew a delegation from Sacramento to Memphis last Friday to check out FedExForum. Completed in 2004 for \$250 million, the Memphis arena is one of the two newest in the National Basketball Association.

As Sacramento city and county leaders struggle to put together a viable plan to replace Arco Arena, they're looking to Memphis as a model of what a modern arena should offer.

"Memphis was suggested by the Maloof Sports and Entertainment as an example of what they wanted in Sacramento," Sacramento Assistant City Manager John Dangberg said in an e-mail Wednesday. He added: "Memphis has elements we collectively like that could be incorporated into a Sacramento facility."



Site of Memphis Arena: The FedExForum occupies a prominent place in downtown Memphis, and serves not only as a sports arena, but as an entertainment hub for the city.

Joe Maloof said FedExForum "is a very nice building" from which he and his brother Gavin gleaned ideas. "Gavin and I have been to practically every building in the NBA," he said. "We'll take bits and pieces from all these buildings; that's how we'll design this."

Dangberg and other negotiators for the city and county spent Tuesday and Wednesday closeted with the Maloofs at the family's Palms hotel in Las Vegas. Four representatives from the city and county spent about \$2,040 during the trip for flights and hotel rooms, officials said.

They broke up Wednesday evening without finalizing an arena agreement. Even as two of the key participants -- former state Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg and Sacramento County Supervisor Roger Dickinson -- returned to their vacations, they said they planned to keep talking via phone.

They face a tight deadline. If a deal doesn't materialize within days, it will likely be too late to get an arena package on the November ballot -- the last chance until 2008. The idea is to ask voters to approve a sales tax increase to pay for an arena and an array of other community projects.

But first, negotiators have to agree on a long list of issues before putting a proposal before the Board of Supervisors. A key question that remains unresolved is how much the Maloofs will contribute.

"We've made a little progress, but there are a number of issues left," Joe Maloof said.

Among those taking a two-hour tour of FedExForum last Friday were Dangberg, Vice Mayor Rob Fong and Sacramento County economic development director Paul Hahn.

As the delegation made its rounds, workers readied the facility for a concert by country music stars Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, who are scheduled to play at Arco Arena next month.

Fong said he came away impressed.

"You don't realize what you don't have until you see something else," he said. "The way they had the real restaurants in there, the meeting rooms, the really wide concourses, the kid areas. ... It was pretty impressive."

FedExForum is located in downtown Memphis' entertainment district; there's a rock 'n' roll museum in front. Westin is building a new high-rise hotel across the street.

"It's pretty obvious that it's spurring some pretty neat redevelopment," Fong said.

When they entered negotiations with the Maloofs, city and county leaders made one thing clear: They want to see a new arena built in the downtown railyard, not in North Natomas, surrounded by a sea of surface parking. They say team owners agreed.

Downtowns have become favored locations for new arenas. Inside, the new facilities are often packed with revenue-producing amenities.

Arnold Perl, a Memphis lawyer who oversaw construction of FedExForum, said his New Memphis Arena Public Building Authority borrowed features from Conseco Fieldhouse in Indianapolis.

"Inside, it's quite similar," Perl said of the two arenas. "There are some differences. We have one inch of extra legroom."

On the outside, however, Conseco Field and FedExForum look very different, he said. FedExForum's brick facade was designed to fit into its Memphis neighborhood. It has a public plaza in front where the Memphis Grizzlies organization often promotes upcoming events or holds concerts, said Stephen Zito, vice president of arena operations.

Inside, the theme is Memphis' musical heritage. There are two sit-down restaurants and a lounge accessible only to premium ticket holders. Another restaurant on the street level is open to everyone. FedExForum has 59 luxury suites with wet bars and plasma TVs. It also pioneered the concept of "club boxes," essentially groupings of four to six extra-wide seats with a granite countertop in front and food and drink service.

An area for children includes arcade games and other entertainments, including a machine that takes a picture of your shadow, Zito said.

Arco, meanwhile, has a tiny lounge for premium seat holders -- Maloof called it a "cubbyhole" -- a narrow concourse made tighter by portable food booths, and a kitchen with one eight-burner stove.

"First and foremost, you've got to have a kitchen that's big enough to take care of your customers," Maloof said. "We probably have the smallest kitchen in the NBA."

He said he envisions an arena that celebrates Sacramento's railroad heritage and includes a venue to "showcase the great wines of Northern California."

While the Sacramento delegation may be looking to Memphis as a model of what an arena can look like, Dangberg stressed that FedExForum can't serve as a model for how Sacramento can pay for a new arena.

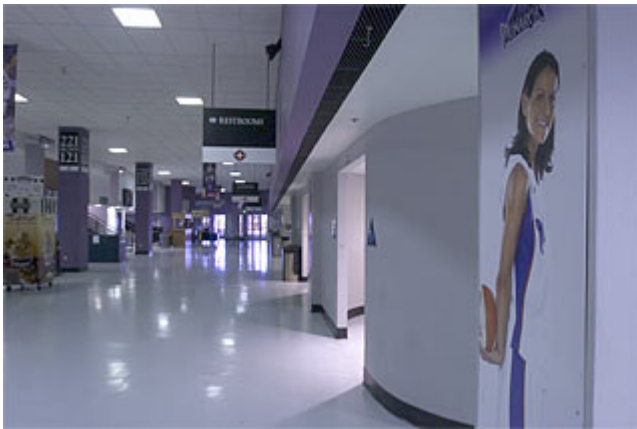
In Memphis, there was no public vote on the arena, even though it was constructed with bond funds backed by local government. The bonds are being repaid through downtown sales taxes and a ticket surcharge.

Construction costs also have escalated dramatically since FedExForum was finished, making \$250 million an obsolete number when it comes to figuring out how much it will cost to build a similar facility here.

"It would be nice if we could build it for that, but we can't," Fong said.

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ARCO: In Sacramento, the concourse area is narrow, with portable food booths. There's only one small kitchen to prepare meals for premium seat holders. SacramentoBee/Hector Amezcua

How Arco compares

Estimates for the construction cost of a new Sacramento sports arena use the FedExForum as a model facility.

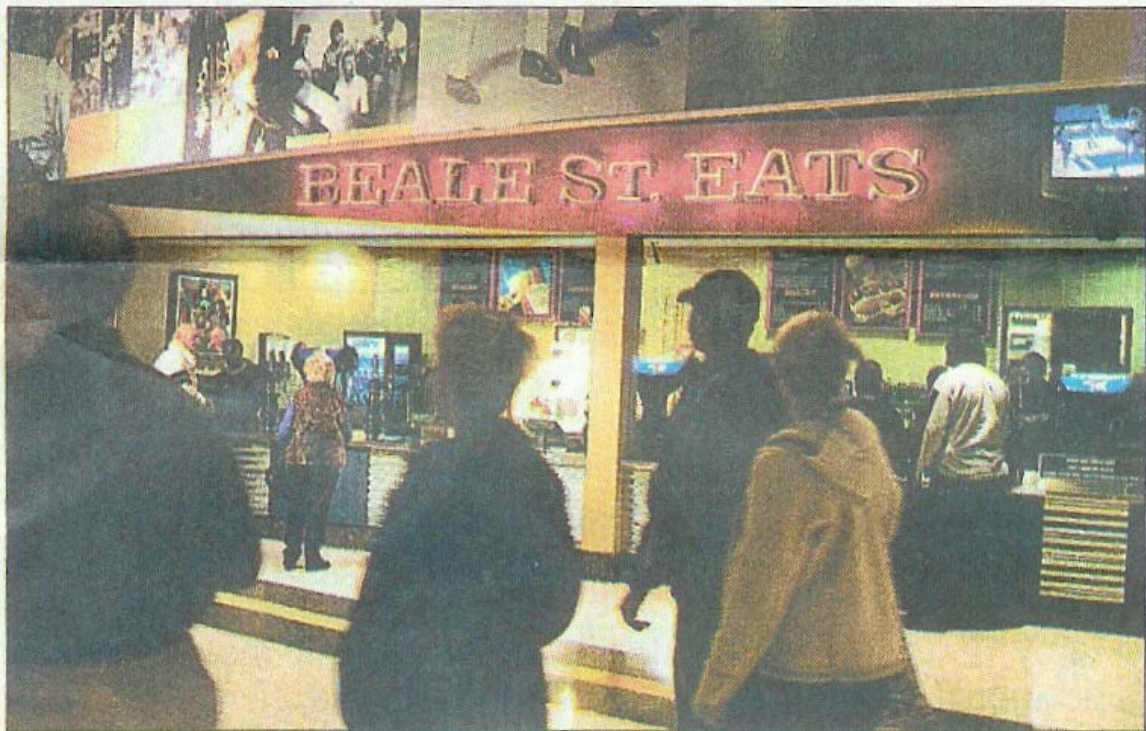
	Arco Arena	FedExForum Memphis, Tenn.
Year completed	1988	2004
Overall square footage	450,000	800,000
Concourses		
Number of public concourses	1	2
Average main concourse width (feet)	22	28
Private suite and/or club concourses	0	3
Seating		
Number of seats: Basketball	17,317	18,200
Hockey	12,000	12,700
Suites	30	60
Club seats	0	1,500
Upper deck seats	52%	47%
Food service		
Main concourse (seats per cash register)	307	101
Upper concourse (seats per cash register)	–	174
Number of food courts	0	6
Locker rooms		
Home locker room (square feet)	3,900	13,800
Visiting locker room (square feet)	1,275	1,700
Star dressing rooms (number/square feet)	4/390	4/1,700
Operations facilities		
Central kitchen/commissary (square feet)	5,300	13,400
Marshaling/storage areas (square feet)	13,600	26,000
Truck and trash docks	2	7

Sources: Threesixty Architecture, Arco Arena

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The (Memphis, Tenn.) Commercial Appeal/Mark Weber
▲ **FEDEXFORUM:** Memphis Grizzlies fans walk through the FedExForum concourse, which features many eateries and food choices. Officials say the concessions choices dwarf what's available at Arco Arena in Sacramento.