

# Tacoma Dome could do just fine by steering clear of the big leagues

## HIGHLIGHTS

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BILL VIRGIN - Contributing writer

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But in continuing the spirit of the season, let us look at the bright side of this news.

For the first time in, well, maybe forever, a consulting firm has told the governmental entity that hired it to do a feasibility study of some pipe dream that the idea is, in fact, not feasible.

Given its rarity, such an occurrence might be taken as a more certain sign of the apocalypse than some obscure Mayan scribblings. It is more likely, however, that the event was a one-time cosmic fluke rather than a sign of more skeptical scrutiny of proposed government boondoggles.

For multitudinous reasons the idea of overhauling the Dome to compete for a professional sports franchise made little sense – the competition from an arena up north (and maybe two, depending on what happens with KeyArena), the smaller population base, lower national profile, lack of financial resources or major corporate headquarters in Tacoma compared with Seattle.

And that's not even starting in on the dubious financial model upon which professional sports currently rests (as well as the NHL's current work stoppage and the league's seeming determination to render itself even less relevant on the national sports scene than it is already – and that's a view coming from a hockey fan).

But even if it was an easy call to make, the consultants did the Dome, city government and taxpayers a huge favor by discouraging the idea of a remodel running to hundreds of millions of dollars in pursuit of an unachievable goal.

Remarkable – and yet not even the most remarkable feature of the report.

As noted by TNT reporter Lewis Kamb, Chicago-based AECOM did provide details on a more affordable strategy for the Dome with greater likelihood of success: “Modernize the arena so it’s more competitively viable for amateur sports, concerts and events other than pro hoops or hockey.”

Hello? Is there an echo in here?

Astute readers of the TNT – and if you are a TNT reader you are ipso facto astute – will note that precisely that strategy, particularly the part about amateur sports, is one advocated the last few years in this space and by people around town.

Tacoma is too small, too financially limited to play in the big leagues of big-league sports. But that’s not the only game in town. The city can make a very nice living for itself – filling dates at its venues (not just the Dome but the convention center as well), generating customers and revenue for hotels, restaurants and other businesses, bringing activities for residents to enjoy – through local, regional, state, national and even international events that don’t need and can’t afford gold-plated venues with luxury suites from floor to ceiling.

That business won’t show up by itself. Just as the Tacoma Dome will be feeling the competitive pinch on the top end from whatever arena is eventually built in Seattle or Bellevue, it also finds itself in competition with pocket arenas in Kent and Everett and events centers in Puyallup and elsewhere in the region.

Tacoma has to want that business if it expects to snare it. It will require a concerted, coordinated, dedicated effort, whether by the city, the Chamber, the sports commission or some other entity. (If you want a sense of what’s possible, at least on the amateur sports front, take a gander at the webpage of the Spokane Regional Sports Commission). It will require staying in close contact with existing tenants and event sponsors to get a sense of the competitive landscape, to identify problems and shortcomings (and fix them) and to reassure them that Tacoma is paying attention.

It will require not just recruiting events and running them but locally creating, organizing and owning events, to avoid a repeat of the Wintergrass experience in which an event is nurtured locally only to have it depart.

A scan of the Tacoma Dome's online events calendar reveals a smattering of concerts, truck shows, the circus, high school sports – and a lot of empty space that could be filled far more reliably and affordably than by chasing professional sports.

Provided, of course, that the city actually pays attention to the advice consultants gave, even if it wasn't the advice city leaders hoped they were buying.

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