

Columbus provides blueprint for how to develop Mellon Arena site

By Tom Fontaine
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COLUMBUS, Ohio — About \$1 billion in development around an arena primarily for hockey transformed a dreary section of downtown Columbus that used to be an industrial area and home to a run-down prison.

"People didn't come downtown very often, and they certainly didn't live here. Things are different now. This is a place to be," said Sherri Lyle, 44, of suburban Powell, who works in Columbus' 14-year-old Arena District.

The Pittsburgh Penguins are paying attention. The team is preparing to develop a 28-acre site where the Civic Arena stood, across Centre Avenue from the \$321 million Consol Energy Center that opened in 2010.

"We've sat down and talked with them several times about what they have done relative to development," said Penguins Chief Operating Officer Travis Williams, noting the team studied similar projects in Cincinnati, Dallas, Philadelphia, San Jose, Washington and Pittsburgh's North Shore.

"Developing a large site around an arena is a challenge," said Brian J. Ellis, President and Chief Operating Officer of Columbus-based Nationwide Realty Investors. "There are a lot of dark days when the team isn't playing. The goal is to get 365 days of activity around the arena."

The Arena District grew around the 22-acre site of the former Ohio Penitentiary.

It closed in 1984 and darkened the downtown landscape for more than a decade until the city acquired it and tore it down.

The addition of more than 50 acres included a largely abandoned industrial area with parking lots and old factory buildings, warehouses and rail yards.

The Arena District grew to more than 100 acres since the \$175 million Nationwide Arena opened in 2000, along with several office buildings. So has the area's economic impact.

A 2008 report by Ohio State University estimated more than 7,000 people worked in the district, area businesses posted annual sales of \$1.6 billion, and consumer spending by 800 residents totaled nearly \$32 million a year. A Columbus Chamber of Commerce study in 2009 projected the area would generate \$60 million a year in state and local taxes by 2018.

Ellis said he couldn't provide more up-to-date economic impact numbers but noted the district has grown since the studies came out.



Nationwide Realty Investors' Arena District is an inspiration to the Pittsburgh Penguins as they plan a new development project.

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“It’s been a little bit of a rocket ship ride,” Ellis said of the rapid development.

The district includes a minor-league baseball stadium, about 800 residential units, 1.5 million square feet of office space and 300,000 square feet of retail, restaurant and entertainment space, including an indoor-outdoor concert venue resembling Stage AE on Pittsburgh’s North Shore.

Downtown resident Jon Rudwall, 25, thinks the Arena District complements

other emerging areas of downtown and the artsy Short North neighborhood. It sits between them.

“It’s a great segue between downtown and the Short North. It brings a lot of foot traffic and energy to the whole area,” Rudwall said.

Amid the new buildings are reminders of the area’s past, from old, iron prison-cell doors used as trellises for plants to decorative steel beams and rivets. The towering Union Station Arch along Nationwide Boulevard, the district’s spine, acts as a window to the manicured McFerson Commons and upscale condominiums and apartments.

“If I could afford it, I’d love to live down here,” said Sabrina Fisher, 42, of the East Side, a die-hard fan of the National Hockey League’s Columbus Blue Jackets, which calls the arena home.

Monthly rents range from \$895 for a 510-square-foot studio to \$2,245 for two-

bedroom apartments. Condos sell for \$376,000 to \$1.45 million, according to the properties’ websites.

Rent became too much of a burden for the Blue Jackets.

The team leased the arena from Nationwide Realty and The Dispatch Printing Co. until a city-county authority agreed to buy the facility in 2012. The city and Franklin County pledged \$250 million through 2039 in a deal that cuts the team’s costs by \$9.5 million a year and keeps it in Columbus, officials said.

“This area used to be a ghost town. Now there is all kinds of activity, especially when the Blue Jackets are playing. It’s great for the city and the economy,” Suzie Sadek, 35, of the West Side said as she pushed a stroller with her two young children across Nationwide Boulevard. ■
