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January 24, 2011

Dear Mayor and Councillors,

Re: Downtown Sports and Entertainment District

I cringe every time I see a reference to the “Downtown Arena” in the media or hear someone speak publicly about the “Downtown Arena”. It is exactly that mental image of a Rexall Place plopped down in a parking lot next to the Baccarat Casino that helps fuel the nebulous negativity that’s pervasive in our City regarding this project.

I don’t know anyone, least of all Daryl Katz, who has ever said that the vision is to build an Arena in the Downtown. I have certainly hear the Katz Group people speak passionately about a “Sports and Entertainment District” anchored by a multi faceted facility which would far exceed the capacity of the current Rexall Place in providing a venue for all types of entertainment, sports and community events for the Downtown community, the City, the Capital Region and beyond.

But it must be noted that this multi faceted facility, containing an arena and much more, would only occupy a relatively small portion of the land envisioned, by the Katz Group, for the sports and entertainment district. Certainly, the majority of the land is slated for a diverse assortment of new and exciting development in our Downtown. And, in truth, the actual development potential extends to the lands beyond the borders of the 16 acre Katz Group site, expanding the probable eventual size of the district into property around the periphery. Of course, the ultimate municipal tax revenue flowing into the City’s coffers, for perpetuity, from development of this magnitude should make even the most Downtown critical Edmonton taxpayers salivate.

I think everyone would agree that the single most important ingredient in vibrant, exciting Downtowns is people; lots and lots of people. And the more diverse and eclectic the demographics of those people, the better. The new arena facility itself would bring, literally, hundreds of thousands of new people into the Downtown attending the many and varied sports and entertainment events each year. Partnerships between the arena facility and our major Downtown learning institutions and various residential development opportunities in the new district also add to the mix in attracting new people to the core.



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The existing casino is a small, fairly isolated destination oriented gambling facility that, by nature, contributes little to the general economy of the Downtown. The new casino envisioned as a part of the sports and entertainment district would be much larger and contain a variety of entertainment options more along the line of establishments like the River Cree Casino complete with new hotel capacity with bus tour possibilities. The people attracted to a facility such as this would frequent retail outlets and be far more likely to start or finish their entertainment experience in existing and new restaurants and clubs in our Downtown. Because the new retail and commercial services in this district would fill the niche of complimenting the development envisioned, they would diversify and add to the existing business base creating a more attractive cluster of shopping and services in the overall Downtown.

The sentiment I hear most often in this debate is, “a sports and entertainment district anchored by a multi faceted facility and all the other new development envisioned, would be a huge, once in a lifetime, positive project for the Downtown, the City of Edmonton and, in fact, the entire region; **if it’s done right**”. That short caveat, “if it’s done right”, seems to sum up what’s important to people whether they’re the residential taxpayers, members of the business community or even the politicians, and includes concerns about who’s paying for it, what it will look like, who will the partners be, how long it will take to build out the district, and just about any other thing that a project of this size and importance brings to mind.

I hope that City Council and the Katz Group, together with the other crucial partners in this project, can lead us through the maze of complex issues and bring this great vision to fruition. Our Downtown has, cumulatively, made tremendous strides in revitalization over the past decade and that vitalization will continue with or without a sports and entertainment district. But, *if it’s done right*, there can’t be any doubt that the sports and entertainment district envisioned for this vast area that is now, predominately, surface parking lots, will mean the difference between our Downtown leaping forward rather than creeping forward as the vibrant center of the entire Edmonton Capital Region.

Yours truly,

Jim Taylor, Executive Director
Downtown Business Association

c.c. Katz Group