5. Issue 1: To Build an Arena and a Stadium

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IN THE LAST decades of the twentieth century, big time sports expanded into many different cities. New sports franchises formed, and new owners joined the world of sports entrepreneurship. Successful local business people found that they could add to their status by becoming owners of professional teams. Meanwhile, fans adjusted to the loss of their favorite players as teams shifted locations or made trades of existing athletes.

New stadiums, arenas, and ballparks spread across the country as taxpayers put up millions of dollars for facilities that might otherwise have gone to pay for improvements in schools, housing, health care, and other human services. All the while, our major cities still faced troubles—spreading physical deterioration, increasing poverty, worsening financial problems, and decreasing investment in the downtowns.

In the face of this downward slide, the urban redevelopment game became much more difficult to play because federal programs assisting the cities provided only a trickle of resources compared to what had been available at midcentury. Through the creative use of available programs, some cities turned the situation around. The idea spread that downtowns could be saved if they connected to places attractive to businesses, shoppers, and residents. Proponents of this view envisioned downtown as a fun place, an entertainment district offering first-class music, drama, dining, and sports activities that appealed to a broad cross-section of the community.

Columbus was no exception to the push for business-district entertainment. As suburbanization drew away people, shopping, and jobs, its down-
town sorely needed investment. The Columbus Titans and their friends in the business and government growth coalition worked diligently for at least fifteen years to turn the city around. By the mid-1990s, several major revitalization projects were either completed or underway, including new state and private sector office buildings; a large, new, upscale shopping mall; several new or refurbished hotels; a new county criminal-justice center; a new center of science and industry; several new or restored theaters; a world-class convention center; an upgraded farm market; and high-rise luxury condominiums. Public parks and spaces were created or upgraded. In addition, gentrification spread into several of the neighborhoods near downtown. And inner-city neighborhood associations became increasingly feisty and vociferous and demanded that city government pay more attention to their problems.

In addition, people enjoyed summer festivals—arts, jazz, ethnic, blues—along the improved banks of the Scioto riverfront in the heart of the central business district. Nearby businesses prospered along High Street, the main north-south street passing through the heart of downtown, a thoroughfare lined with all manner of art galleries, boutiques, hostleries, and eateries. This redevelopment stretched from the northern tip of downtown to just south of Ohio State’s campus area, a lively stretch known as the “Short North” bounded by gentrifying neighborhoods to the west and east (see Figure 2 in Chapter 4).

Yet downtown was still in trouble. The northwest corner of the central business district was particularly in need of a facelift. It was the site of the former Ohio Penitentiary (Old Pen), a complex of a dozen or so buildings collapsing from neglect. It had become a safety hazard to passersby, and much of it had to be razed. The state of Ohio eventually passed ownership of the Old Pen site to the city, a problem that remained unsolved through the administrations of several mayors.

How could downtown redevelopment be moved ahead? To the Titans, what could be better than to link a new professional sports franchise for the city with a new hockey arena and soccer stadium located on the Pen site? Such a project could enhance the operation of the nearby convention center and stimulate a business comeback of the northwest sector of the downtown. Several of the Titans, known locally as the “Dream Team” because of their collective social and business prominence, had a good shot at obtaining a National Hockey League franchise. There was a catch, however: The Dream Team needed an arena, and they wanted the taxpayers to pay for it.
The winter and spring seasons of 1997 in Columbus were marked by a heated battle over a ballot issue known as Issue 1, which asked voters to support a three-year sales-tax increase to construct both an arena and a stadium that would house professional sports and other entertainment events. Issue 1 was played for very high stakes, and its passage would result in some very desirable outcomes.

Taxpayers would provide the money for the construction of a hockey arena, and the hockey arena would secure the Dream Team’s entrée into the world of big time sports entrepreneurship. Taxpayers would also pay for the construction of a soccer stadium, and that would ensure that Lamar Hunt’s professional team, the Crew, would remain in Columbus. In addition, the construction of the soccer stadium and hockey arena on the site of the old, decrepit Ohio Penitentiary would be a major catalyst for the revitalization of the rundown northwest section of downtown. The hockey arena, given its proposed location, would provide a much-needed expansion of the convention center’s meeting space and would thus help attract the largest conventions to Columbus.

For the populist opposition group, the defeat of Issue 1 would be a major political victory. In their view it would be a significant step forward in their continuing battle against the top-down, local government’s and business community’s support of corporate welfare, the waste of public funds, and taxpayer exploitation. The opposition had beaten the Titans earlier on arena-tax issues, but this time the stakes were higher. To overcome the resources that the Titans would pour into the campaign against them, the opposition leadership would have to use their most persuasive skills because this was their only weapon. They had virtually no finances to bring to the fray.

**Issue 1 Background**

Several separate matters became intertwined and tangled at the time of the Issue 1 sales tax battle.

- There was active planning of two arenas. OSU and the downtown pro-growth coalition each planned to build an arena. These arenas would only be two and one-half miles apart. Indeed, they would be in sight of each other.

- The Titans kept up their ongoing efforts to bring major league sports to Columbus.
The Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority (FCCFA) planned to undertake a major expansion of the convention center that would include a major arena/convention center on the Pen site.

The sense grew among people in Columbus as well as across the country that the big time sports entrepreneurs who demanded public funding for their new stadiums and arenas were exploiting taxpayers.

**Dueling Arenas?**

Andy Geiger, Ohio State’s athletic director in the 1990s, pursued a major upgrading and expansion of the university’s athletic facilities (see Chapter 4). Building a new arena on campus was the centerpiece of his plans, and it was to be home to university basketball and ice hockey. It would also host other entertainment and university functions.

Yet OSU was not the only Columbus organization planning for a new arena. The Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority, an independent public authority, but an important and powerful arm of the local pro-growth regime, also wanted an arena. The FCCFA managed the convention center, which was funded by a local hotel-motel bed tax, and it wanted an arena so it could book shows and sports events and thereby attract more visitors. The center was located on the north end of the central business district.

The state of Ohio had granted the FCCFA, as a public authority, the right of eminent domain, the authority to take private property for market-value price for use in the authority’s activities. The Titans could use the FCCFA to further their ambitions for downtown by acquiring property near the Old Pen site—an arena added to the convention center would revitalize the north part of town and solve the problem of the Old Pen eyesore.

This seemed reasonable because convention business had been good. Between 1993 and 1996 the number of conventions the center hosted rose from 446 to 702. Attendance grew from 686,165 to 825,955. The local economic impact went from $402.8 million in 1993 to $512.0 million in 1996. Yet the FCCFA believed the center could do even better with more assembly space and improved facilities. This looked like an attainable goal and one well worth pursuing. It made sense to the downtown leadership that an arena should be adjacent to or part of the convention-center complex. It would help the center expand its available convention dates and offerings and generate revenue from nonconvention activities. Furthermore, it would provide a venue that professional sports would find attractive.
Both the downtown interests and OSU wanted state money to help with their arena plans. The state of Ohio’s 120th general assembly appropriated $15 million for OSU’s arena but attached serious strings to the offer. Most importantly for our story, the state’s capital-improvement budget legislation required the university to consult with the city of Columbus about “specific site, use, and operations” for the OSU arena.

The legislature’s requirements were a response to three concerns. First, many of those inside and outside the legislature felt that Columbus could not support two new arenas in proximity—one downtown and one on campus. Second, the state could get stuck financially with an unsuccessful hockey arena venture. Third, several local elites wanted to make OSU a partner in the downtown project as long as OSU would pay a good share of the construction costs. The elites had floated the idea that, as a good neighbor of the downtown development interests, OSU should move its home games in basketball, hockey, and other sports to a downtown civic arena. The university as usual strongly opposed such an arrangement. It contended that OSU activities must stay on campus, and it eventually consulted with the city, but only because the legislature demanded it.

On June 6, 1994, OSU’s President Gordon Gee and Columbus Mayor Greg Lashutka appointed a two-person team to conduct a conversation between the university and downtown. An important Titan, developer, and sportsman, Ron Pizzuti, represented the mayor. OSU trustee George Skestos represented Gee. During their discussions they considered but dropped a proposal to construct a facility located midway between downtown and campus. That option was not acceptable to the university. It also was not the best alternative for the downtown interests because it did not contribute to the convention center’s upgrading. In its report to President Gee and Mayor Lashutka on September 13, 1994, the committee concluded that “no single arena could serve the needs of OSU and the community.”

The committee provided several reasons for this conclusion. First, Ohio State’s scheduling needs for sports, commencements, convocations, and other university-related activities simply did not provide enough open dates for community events and professional sports. Second, OSU planned to use tax-free bonds to fund the arena. For this type of funding, federal tax laws limited the extent of use that private profit-making entities could make of such a facility to only ten percent of all dates. Clearly, professional sports franchises and other profit-making ventures would not have been able to obtain enough dates under this law. Third, conference rules prohibited uni-
versity-owned arenas from housing professional sports franchises. Fourth, an arena that complemented the downtown convention center would best serve the downtown redevelopment interests.

Although the committee concluded that “joint use of this facility is not practical,” it did not give OSU a free hand. The committee approved the university’s preferred on-campus site, adjacent to its new baseball stadium and close to its famous “horseshoe” football stadium. However, the committee said that OSU’s arena use of nonuniversity event dates should complement rather than compete with a downtown civic arena. The committee also mandated that the OSU arena not contain skyboxes, club seating, or other amenities of the sort associated with professional sports arenas, an especially bitter pill for the university since these facilities have proven to be big moneymakers in other places.

That was not the only bitter pill to emerge from the committee’s work, however. The committee’s support for the OSU project meant that the state of Ohio would furnish $15 million to the university for planning and building its twenty-one-thousand-seat arena. At the same time, the state rejected the city’s request for $1 million for planning for a downtown arena. Instead, the state passed legislation saying that any further state help for the city’s arena project would depend on the local voters’ willingness to pass a sales-tax increase. OSU’s victory and Columbus’s loss in the legislature intensified the tension between the university and downtown. Now it was clear that Mayor Lashutka and President Gee were rivals and not pals.

The town-gown friction was further exacerbated when OSU launched a commercial campaign to attract seat-license investors to its new arena. Radio ads promised seat-license buyers that they would qualify for priority tickets for events in addition to OSU sports. The ad promised that “when the circus comes to town, when big time wrestling takes center stage or when the rodeo gallops into Columbus,” seat-license holders will have the first choice of tickets.

This ad enraged the downtown interests, who thought that the parting of ways of the two arenas would give the downtown arena first claim to general entertainment events. Mayor Lashukta said that OSU’s arena use “flies in the face of the commitment made back in 1994. . . . There was a clear indication that the university was pursuing its arena for gender equity in its sports program and as a convocation center and that [it] would not be pursuing activities in conflict with what would be offered at the arena being pursued Downtown.” The shock and anger the mayor expressed were also felt by many members of the downtown elite. They had been absolutely convinced
that the OSU arena would not compete with a downtown stadium. Some of them felt they had been misled or tricked by OSU.

Given the intensity of the downtown reaction, Ohio State’s Andy Geiger had the commercial pulled from the air. He said that the ads “caused confrontational feelings in this community that were not intended. . . . We intend to manage the building wisely and aggressively but not confrontationally.” Geiger went on to say, however, that a campus community of many thousands of students and employees needed a wide variety of entertainment events, and those interests should be reflected in the university arena’s schedule. He also pointed out that the university arena would be in operation two years before the downtown arena. “We aren’t going to sit here and have our arena dark in the meantime,” he added. OSU started a direct-mail campaign carrying essentially the same message. Clearly the arena race was on and OSU was ahead.

**Soccer, Hockey, and the Dream Team**

While Gordon Gee and Andy Geiger had focused on enhancements to the campus athletic and entertainment infrastructure, Titan Ron Pizzuti had taken the lead for many years in the city’s attempt to bring major league sports to Columbus. He was a primary catalyst in the community leadership’s development of a pro–major league sports stance. In 1994, when a major, professional soccer league was becoming a reality, Ron Pizzuti attracted sports entrepreneur Lamar Hunt’s interest in Columbus as a potential site for an MLS franchise. Hunt regarded Columbus as ripe for such a franchise, but Pizzuti and other local investors refused to take on majority ownership. So Hunt, who was based in Dallas, bought sixty-three percent of the franchise and became the majority operating partner. The Columbus team was named the Crew.

OSU responded to the arrival of professional soccer in Columbus by striking a deal with the Crew that leased Ohio Stadium to the soccer team for home games and gave OSU game concessions and parking money. This deal was acceptable for the short run, but the Crew wanted to control its own facility and keep all of the revenues generated by attendance. So early on, it was clear that something had to be done about a stadium for the Crew. Hunt, when asked by a reporter if he were willing to come up with the cash for a stadium, said, “We are certainly desirous of being helpful in that respect. The Crew will be a prime tenant in the stadium, and we are certainly knowledgeable about what it takes to put a stadium together. We want
to be part of the process.” Most observers took this to be a “no” to the prospect of Hunt’s funding the stadium. In the long run, however, Hunt did much more than just contribute to the “process.”

At this time it was becoming clear that the National Hockey League was preparing to expand and was looking for cities that would be profitable for the NHL. Ron Pizzuti and the other Titans believed that Columbus would be competitive as a location for an expansion team. The Dream Team seeking the franchise initially included Ron Pizzuti, John F. Wolfe, John McConnell, and Horn Chen, owner of the popular minor league Columbus hockey team, the Chill.9 Pizzuti persuaded Lamar Hunt to join the group, after which Ameritech joined the others. As the Dream Team organized itself in October 1996, it took the name Columbus Hockey Limited Partners. Hunt would emerge as the managing partner if the franchise were awarded, a smart move, many observers thought, because Hunt had connections, a good reputation, and experience with the old American Football League (AFL), the Kansas City Chiefs of the current National Football League (NFL), and the Chicago Bulls of the National Basketball Association (NBA).

The NHL required a significant down payment from expansion-franchise applicants. The Dream Team paid a nonrefundable $100,000 for the application fee. If the franchise were awarded, the Dream Team would then have to raise another $75 million in addition to the operating money required to stock and run a team. To receive a franchise, the Dream Team would also have to have an arena that met professional standards, and they would have to sell a large number of season tickets ahead of time.

In the winter and early spring of 1997, there was serious movement in the quest for a hockey franchise. The Dream Team’s presentation to the NHL’s expansion committee in January was very well received, and it was clear to all that Columbus would be one of the cities on the final list for an expansion team. Later, when NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and the league’s expansion committee made its official visit to the city, they were treated to a rousing pep rally of Columbus fans who were demonstrating their support for the Dream Team’s franchise application. The visit of NHL officials made it clear that Columbus was under serious consideration for a franchise. The NHL expansion committee was scheduled to meet on Friday, May 9, to award the franchise. By then the Dream Team had to have a firm commitment for an arena if it were to be awarded a franchise.

Realizing that the arena had to be committed by May 1997 and wanting to avoid paying for it themselves, the Dream Team collaborated with the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority in an attempt to obtain
public support for an arena. The FCCFA was glad to have the Dream Team on board. It now appeared likely that a potential NHL franchise would clinch taxpayer support for the proposed hockey arena.

**The Convention Center**

Serious planning for downtown sport facilities got underway in 1995. The FCCFA began to think about building an indoor arena near the existing convention center site as well as an outdoor stadium a few blocks away that would be home to Lamar Hunt’s Columbus Crew team. In March the Franklin County Commissioners, the mayor of Columbus, and the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce appointed a ten-member work group to develop soccer stadium plans under the auspices of the FCCFA. This group’s members were a solid representation of the core of the downtown interests and included the city auditor, the county finance director, the president of the Columbus Association of the Performing Arts, the president of the Columbus Chill (minor league hockey team and potential arena tenant), the executive director of the Development Committee of Central Ohio (who also was senior vice president of the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce), the executive director of the FCCFA, the finance director of the city of Columbus, the vice president of marketing for the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, the community relations director of the FCCFA, and the deputy county administrator.

The work group held its first meeting on April 3, 1995, and met over the next eight months more than fifty times. By June the FCCFA had decided it needed an economic-impact study to contribute to its plan development. For the study, the proposed stadium was originally described as a multipurpose outdoor facility with a total seating capacity of 30,000–35,000 people. The proposed arena was envisioned as a multipurpose indoor facility with a seating capacity of 19,000–23,000 people. It would host professional sporting events, concerts, family shows, and high school basketball games (at that time the plans were vague as to which professional sports team would use the indoor arena).

The competitively bid contract for the study was awarded to the California firm of Deloitte and Touche, LLP, which reported its results to the FCCFA late in the fall of 1995. The study’s results were considered favorable for the pro-growth interests. Over a construction period of 2.5 years the project was estimated to generate $197 million in total citywide economic output, support 2,555 full-time equivalent jobs, and yield $1.8 million in new tax revenue. The study forecast additional tax revenues of
$767 million for Franklin County and $7.5 million for the state of Ohio. The annual operation was estimated to produce $100.4 million for the city, support 1,443 full-time-equivalent jobs, and generate $1.15 million in total municipal tax revenue. Additional tax revenue was estimated at $539,000 for the county and $3.8 million for the state.\textsuperscript{10}

The Deloitte and Touche report was based on the optimistic assumption that professional sports would use the facilities and that most of the other available dates would be booked. Not factored in was the inevitable competition between these facilities and OSU’s new arena, named the Value City Arena in the Schottenstein Center. Nevertheless, the downtown arena interests adopted the attitude that “if you build it, they will come.”

On November 30, 1995, the work group met for a final review of the report. The report’s favorable tone was taken as a green light by the pro-growth forces. Within a month the work group issued its own report to the community.\textsuperscript{11} The report recommended the construction of a 21,000-seat arena at a total cost of $163.9 million and a 30,000-seat expandable stadium with a total cost of $112.9 million. The arena site would be at Nationwide Boulevard and Front Street, adjacent to the convention center. The stadium site would be just west of the arena on the land of the former Ohio Penitentiary.

To finance this massive construction project, the report recommended placing two separate ballot issues on the November 1996 ballot, one for the construction of the arena and the other for the construction of the stadium. The report stated that private interests should pledge 22 percent of the project costs (excluding parking and land) before the issue was placed on the county ballot. The report assumed that state involvement would provide grants totaling 12 percent of costs with another 3 percent in loans. It recommended that local public financing of the project would take the form of a half-percent countywide sales tax for three years. This was to be voted on in a countywide vote.

Clearly, much work needed to be accomplished in a short time for any of these plans to come to fruition. To get the ball rolling, the county commissioners decided to require that twenty percent of the construction costs ($43 million) had to be raised from the private sector before they would give their approval for placing a countywide sales tax on the ballot.

**The Heart of the Issue 1 Battle**

The Titans and other backers of Issue 1 faced two challenges. First was the
challenge of raising private sector funds to get on the countywide ballot. Second, once the issue was on the ballot, they needed a campaign to get the voters to pass the proposed tax increase to build the hockey arena and soccer stadium.

The task of crafting a ballot issue and raising the private sector funds was assigned to Doug Kridler, executive director of the Columbus Association for Performing Arts. After months of hard work, Kridler, in his capacity as president of the Community Development Council, was able to raise the required private sector funds. Titan Dimon McFerson’s Nationwide Insurance pledged $17.5 million, John McConnell’s Worthington Industries pledged $5 million, and Titan John McCoy’s Bank One pledged $35 million for the naming rights for the project.

In addition to the private funding, William Jennison, executive director of the FCCFA, figured that the proposed sales tax would raise $193 million, the state of Ohio would provide $41.5 million in grants, investment earnings would produce $5.2 million, and the resale of mixed-use land would bring in $5.2 million. All of this would materialize only if the commissioners approved a ballot issue for the tax and the voters passed the levy. Kridler’s group planned to ask the county commissioners at their upcoming February 18, 1997, meeting to place the issue on the ballot. If the vote passed, the complex design work for the project would be completed in 1997, start-up construction would begin in 1998 and heavy construction in 1999, and arena move-in would take place in the fall of 2000. The stadium move-in would be in the spring of 2000.

In addition to asking the commissioners to place the issue on the ballot was the matter of the timing of the vote. It could be in either May or November. The arena proponents were divided about which date would be better. If May, there would be only about ten weeks in which to persuade the voters to support the issue—maybe too short a time to mount a convincing campaign. If November, the arena tax might come up against a raft of tax-increase proposals for schools, libraries, and mental-health issues—maybe a bad time for an entertainment issue.

Another matter that lurked in the background and lent urgency to the Issue 1 proponents was the timetable for the National Hockey League to make its decision about expansion. That decision was to be made at the NHL’s May meeting, and that would be only three days after the potential May ballot. A firm commitment to arena construction had to be made by then. Given all of these considerations, it seemed that the vote, if there was to be one, had to be held in May. Even so, several of the Titans had reservations about the May ballot, and they worried that it would have less of a
chance of success than if it were on the fall ballot. They called another meeting to rehash the decision about the ballot date a week before the commissioner’s meeting, but the outcome was the same—they would go for May. The issue had momentum now, and further delays might weaken the enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{12}

The first head-to-head skirmish between pro and oppositional interests took place at an open hearing conducted by the commissioners on February 18, 1997. At the hearing, eighteen people spoke in favor of placing the issue on the May ballot and eleven against.\textsuperscript{13} The speakers supporting May used both pro-growth logic and passion. Missing from the meeting, however, were presentations by the core elite involved in the quest for professional hockey—Crew owner Lamar Hunt, developer Ron Pizzuti, Worthington Industries’ John McConnell, and newspaper publisher John Wolfe. They trusted their lieutenants to carry the day, and carry the day they did. Some observers interpreted the absence of the Titans from the meeting as the Titans’ awareness of image problems and their reluctance to have the issue viewed as “toys for rich boys.”

The opposition was much more individualistic and populist in argumentation. While it covered the full political spectrum from very conservative to very liberal, the opposition united behind one sentiment: no tax money for the hockey arena and soccer stadium construction and no ballot in May. At this point, the best way for the opposition to win was to convince the commissioners to refuse to place the issue on the ballot. The opponents argued their case well, and it became very clear that there was to be no middle ground on this matter and no room for compromise.

At the end of the meeting, the commissioners voted unanimously to put the proposed tax on the May ballot—all in one package: Issue 1. For good or ill, Issue 1 linked the fates of the hockey arena and soccer stadium. The issue called for a three-year, half-percent, countywide sales tax for the hockey arena–soccer stadium project. If the proposal passed, the county sales tax would be raised from 5.75 percent to 6.25 percent. Proponents estimated that the tax would raise $192 million of the $277 million needed for the project. Several members of the opposition thought the commissioners’ vote was a “done deal” from the start, given their ties to the city’s political regime. Regardless of the accuracy of that claim, the hearing gave both sides an opportunity to articulate their positions.

\textit{The Issue 1 Campaign Heats Up}

The county commission meeting adjourned after scheduling the vote on
Issue 1 for the May election. This signaled the start of the campaign in earnest. One local paper’s headlines screamed in large, bold print, “THE THRILL OF VICTORY” to describe the county commissioners’ support of the arena backers. The paper went on to say that Richard Sheir, “the leader of the anti-arena movement, had just been dealt a serious blow. The first official engagement of the arena battle had gone, decisively, to the other side.”

Sheir did not agree. He knew that, at best, this was only a minor skirmish in a much longer war. In response he said, “This is exciting, a really exciting time for this city. . . . People from the left and right, all different kinds of people coming together, finding common ground.” In contrast, the Wolfe-owned *Columbus Dispatch* described Sheir’s allies as a rag-tag coalition dedicated to killing the issue.

The opposition was far from rag-tag, however. Active in the defeat of previous arena issues, Richard Sheir (see Chapter 4) had been dubbed the “Arena Slayer” by one local paper, a nickname that stuck and conferred on Sheir celebrity cachet. Over the course of the campaign, he ably translated this reputation into media access in which he surpassed the media attention given to the downtown interests. Sheir was experienced in community conflict, savvy about power and politics, articulate without being offensive, and adept in putting together a working oppositional coalition. The only criticism of Sheir by his anti-arena associates was, as one put it, that he could be “a loose cannon and obsessive. Things were fine as long as Richard could be kept on message.” The members of his coalition all agreed, however, that he had the fire, the experience, and the energy needed for a powerless and underfunded group of citizens to take on the powerful downtown interests and have a chance of winning. He was the right person at the right time and place for this campaign.

Indeed, Richard Sheir began his oppositional campaign before the commissioners’ meeting. The week before that event, Sheir captured the limelight at a news conference held in the lobby of the Franklin County Courthouse. There he decried the proponents’ attempt as part of the arena plan to have the taxpayers pay for a $21-million garage that was expected to generate $2.4 million in annual revenue. Sheir argued that it would be better for local taxpayers if the garage’s construction were financed through revenue bonds that would be repaid from parking revenues. He also criticized the plan’s call to set aside $14.75 million of the proposed sales tax to cover operating expenses. This amounts to “excessive taxation,” Sheir argued, and provided an “operational subsidy for the whole project.”
The arena proponents reacted quickly to Sheir because the parking revenues were targeted to be the reserve funds for keeping the project afloat. Bill Jennison, the convention center’s executive director, said, “Whether it’s parking revenues or operating reserves, Richard Sheir seems to want to strip from the project the layers of protection [that] the work group included for the taxpayer.”

Sheir’s message expressed the view of many community members, however. One resident asked a telling question in a letter to the editor. “Haven’t we already said ‘no’ and on four separate occasions?” he wrote. “How is it under these circumstances you bring this project back before us? We have given you our will: we will not pay for this foolish rich man’s folly with our tax dollars.” Going further, the resident called Issue 1 “an insult, a travesty of your duty to us and a complete violation of our public trust in you that borders on political and fiduciary malfeasance in office.”

The downtown interests dismissed this reaction as a fringe response that was not representative of the general public. They assumed that the public would support the project. As matters played out, the downtown interests were wrong. This person’s views were mainstream for the voters.

Sheir’s group gained strength from its diversity because several able community members who were experienced in local political battles joined him. They included Libertarians, Greens, Democratic Socialists, Democrats, and Republicans. In addition, neighborhood Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) activists in the Short North and Victorian Village joined the anti-Issue 1 coalition on the grounds that the additional traffic and noise generated by stadium and arena events would contribute to a declining quality of life in their areas. Some historic preservationists joined the opposition, too; they were especially disturbed by the plans to complete the leveling of the historic Ohio Penitentiary that was part of the preparation of the arena and stadium site.

As varied as these components of the coalition were in general political philosophy, they agreed on one overarching position—that the arena tax issue had to be killed. Heather M. Loughley, a member of the local Libertarian executive committee and Voters against the Stadium Tax (VAST) cochair, said, “We may have different reasons for opposing the tax, but we do oppose it.” VAST cochair Mark Higdon, a classic low-tax Republican and one-time member of the Franklin County Republican Central Committee, said that there “is always an issue that will bring political enemies together in a common cause and this is one of those issues.” Third cochair of VAST, Dennis Knepley, a treasurer for the Central Ohio Green Party,
argued that stadiums and arenas should be located on the outskirts of the city and not downtown, which should be embellished with parks and open greenbelt areas. George Boas, cochair of the Democratic Socialists of Central Ohio, spoke for most of the opposition when he called Issue 1 pure and simple “corporate welfare!”

During the campaign Richard Sheir of VAST and Doug Kridler of Citizens for a Downtown Future and president of the Community Development Council roamed the county making their cases daily. They attended citizens’ gatherings of all types—morning coffees, luncheon meetings, neighborhood interest-group sessions, and community-service organizations meetings. They became hot items for the local media, both print and electronic.

Other members of both the pro–Issue 1 group and the oppositional coalition made public appearances as well. They went to places as varied as suburban newspaper offices and inner-city African American churches. Both the opposition and the pro-arena groups developed Internet web sites to express their positions. This was a new and particularly good strategy in a white-collar, professional town that served as a corporate home to computer-information businesses. Many observers argued that the opposition’s web site was better at presenting its case than the pro–Issue 1 site.

Hunt Steps Up

All through the short campaign, the opposition attacked Hunt as an outsider who could easily move the Crew to another city at any time he wanted. Essentially, the argument was that he simply could not be trusted. To counter this, Hunt made a long-term commitment to Columbus sports and entertainment. In a letter of intent to the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority signed 25 days before the vote, Hunt and the Hunt Sports Group agreed that Hunt would share some of the operating profits with the community as well as provide a number of other tangible benefits in exchange for the exclusive right to control and manage the soccer stadium and hockey arena and the related parking facilities and to collect all revenues from the use of the facilities. These included a set of 25-year leases for each facility, payment of rent to FCCFA of $3 million per year for the duration of the leases, and a guaranteed profit payment to the FCCFA of $200,000 per year for 25 years.

Hunt was also willing to provide Franklin County residents with priority ticket-purchase opportunities and to operate the facilities in such a manner as to secure prime tenants including Major League Soccer and NHL
hockey. He promised to work with the FCCFA to keep design and construction within the established budget and cover all of the operating costs, thereby relieving the city of Columbus, Franklin County, and the FCCFA of fiscal responsibility for revenue shortfalls.

Richard Sheir reacted swiftly to Hunt’s offer. He said that this deal between Hunt and the FCCFA was a giant-sized, unbid contract between a public agency and a private organization. He asked, “How are we to know Hunt Sports is the best bidder for the project when it isn’t a public bid?” Sheir also pointed out that cost-containment measures applied to operation and not to construction overruns. He argued that the cleanup of the Old Pen site portion of the project might reveal that the site was contaminated and would require a very expensive cleanup. This was not reflected in the proposed budget. Who, Sheir wanted to know, would pay for that?

Responding to Sheir, convention facilities executive director William Jennison said that he believed the Hunt deal “guarantees a profit” and protected against losses and that nobody but Hunt can do that.”23 Other Issue 1 proponents were no better at replying to VAST’s criticism. They could only promise that the FCCFA would simply work to contain costs.

**Gordon Gee Steps Up**

In addition to Lamar Hunt, OSU’s President Gordon Gee played a prominent public role as a supporter of Issue 1. In many ways his participation was very curious and certainly did not seem to advance the chances for Issue 1’s passage. Even though relations between Ohio State and downtown were strained over the potential competition between OSU’s new Value City Arena and the proposed downtown hockey arena and soccer stadium, the downtown interests had named Gordon Gee as a cochair of the pro–Issue 1 campaign. Social pressure on Gee was high. How could Ohio State’s top man risk his reputation as a good community citizen and not get on board? Campus insiders figured that Gee was just going through the motions in order to ease tensions with the Lashutka administration. Serious opponents of Issue 1 also viewed it as a public-relations move. Everyone knew that the campus arena project was Gee’s real priority and that he would do anything to protect OSU interests.

Gee made appearances supporting the issue, gave interviews, and even appeared in television and radio commercials. However, the commercials proved to be disastrous for the pro–Issue 1 supporters. Gee, normally a highly energetic, ebullient, and intelligent communicator, displayed none of
those characteristics in the commercials. Many observers thought that he looked dour, strained, and sounded unenthusiastic—not at all like his normal self. The ad was pulled after a few days, but by then the damage was done, and the message was clear that Ohio State’s interests were first, last, and always Ohio State. To make matters even worse for Issue 1, President’s Gee’s wife, Constance, wrote a letter to the editor of a local paper that seemed to speak out against the issue.

In this chapter we saw how a number of separate matters became intertwined in Columbus at the time of the Issue 1 sales-tax initiative. The Titans worked on attracting professional sports teams to Columbus. The FCCFA included both an indoor arena and an outdoor stadium in its plans for an expansion of the convention center. OSU made plans to build its own indoor arena, which would compete with a downtown facility. Meanwhile, people in Columbus, as well as elsewhere in the country, were becoming sensitive to the fact that big time sports entrepreneurs were exploiting taxpayers through demands for public funding for their new stadiums and arenas. In the next chapter we see how these matters are fought out when we observe the final weeks of the campaign and the vote on the Issue 1.