High Stakes
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THROUGHOUT THE winter and early spring of 1997, the Issue 1 campaign was fought rough and tumble all over the county—in public forums, on radio and television, and in the newspapers. Issue 1 proponents told the Columbus and Franklin County voters that the community really needed the arena and stadium—now called by the proponents the Downtown Family and Sport Entertainment District. It would make downtown a center for family entertainment, they said. It would bring an NHL hockey team to town. It would encourage further economic rejuvenation of downtown. Most importantly—it would put Columbus on the map. The proponents thought that by framing the issue this way, they could get the support of the majority of voters.

They thought they could persuade women voters with the “family” part of the concept, and they thought they could win the young male voters who would want to see big-league, professional sports. They hoped they could get the concertgoers who regularly drove to Cleveland, Cincinnati and Indianapolis for the big shows to vote for an arena downtown. They thought they could gain support from the suburban soccer parents who drove their kids all over the metropolitan area for games, and they thought they could win the Black voters with the lure of more downtown jobs. They also thought they could get the independent business class who regularly lined up behind the chamber of commerce issues.
All through winter and early spring, however, the opposition stayed on their message and framed their anti–Issue 1 stance in terms of corporate welfare. The dissenters knew from past experience that Columbus voters were not inclined to support tax increases unless there was a demonstrable payoff, such as mental health services, a library, and improvements in children’s welfare. The opposition was careful to say they were not against the building of a soccer stadium and hockey arena per se; what they were against was asking the public to fund what the corporations should fund themselves.

Win-Lose

Paying the Price

The tough campaign took its toll on the participants. Doug Kridler, point man for the Issue 1 proponents, and Richard Sheir, point man of the opposition, grew weary from their nonstop campaigning. As draining as the campaign was for those two, it was Mayor Greg Lashutka who paid the biggest physical price for Issue 1.

The mayor’s fifty-third birthday on March 28, 1997, had to be one of his least happy celebrations. He held his weekly cabinet meeting that morning and was treated to a birthday muffin decorated with the appropriate candle. After blowing out the candle, he headed to the emergency room at OSU’s hospitals to have a persistent chest pain examined. He was admitted immediately and fortunately survived a heart attack in reasonably good condition. After days of intensive observation he was released with the admonition: no more sixteen-hour days, no more fast food, and regular heart-rehab exercise. The mayor counted himself lucky. After returning to work, he said that his illness made him clearly see that his family was what really mattered the most. In fact, in the flurry of TV commercials shortly before the vote on Issue 1, Mayor Lashutka told viewers that his heart attack helped him focus on what really mattered in life—his family and his community—and that was why he supported the Downtown Family and Sports Entertainment District.

April Surprises

By the middle of April the Issue 1 campaign had saturated the news. By then, Columbus residents pretty well knew what was at stake and the arguments
on both sides. The poll results made it look doubtful that Issue 1 would pass. The *Columbus Dispatch* poll, considered by many polling experts as one of the most accurate in the country on electoral issues, had Issue 1 going down by 55 to 38 percent.

By this time the opposition became emboldened as they sensed victory. In fact, Richard Sheir gave his opposition leadership colleagues a major surprise as well as “the fits” when on his own, he called a highly placed Franklin County administrator and told him that he, Sheir, would support the arena if the county would yank it from the forthcoming ballot, drop the soccer stadium, and finance it the way Sheir wanted them to finance it—without a tax. Sheir, in effect, was offering the proponents a draw, but no one saw it that way. The proponents said that Sheir was just grandstanding. With Hunt’s need for a stadium, there was simply no way for Sheir to be taken seriously. Moreover, Sheir’s colleagues in the opposition were shocked that he would go so far off message when victory was so close. They wanted Sheir just to cool it and stay on message—too much was at stake.

Peter Karmanos Jr., Detroit businessman and the owner of the NHL’s Hartford Whalers, initiated a second April surprise in the Columbus community. Karmanos was planning to relocate his franchise from Hartford to a city that had a higher potential for successfully supporting a big-league hockey team. Columbus was at the top of his list. Karmanos saw the lack of an arena as only a temporary problem. In fact, he considered as a short-term solution the possibility of remodeling an unused hangar at the city’s main airport. He said this would work until the city built an arena for his team. The Issue 1 proponents were quite upset with Karmanos. They saw all their hard work in getting Issue 1 on the ballot, building support for hockey and soccer, raising funds to campaign, and carrying the issue to the community coming to naught. They viewed Karmanos as a usurper who would ruin things for the downtown elite by stealing away their opportunity to become big time sports owners. They saw him as playing off Columbus against other cities in a bid to get the best possible deal for his team. They also regarded Karmanos as confusing the voters at a crucial, make-or-break time in the Issue 1 campaign. Ultimately, Karmanos decided to take his franchise elsewhere. He left few friends in Columbus. Indeed, many downtown elite blamed Karmanos for the defeat of Issue 1.

John McConnell, a former investor in the Pittsburgh Pirates, a successful industrialist and principal of Worthington Industries, and a Columbus civic leader, gave the third April surprise to the National Hockey League
commissioner Gary Bettman. A month before the vote on Issue 1 Bettman and about a dozen NHL owners and executives visited Columbus. It was the league’s official tour of the city as a possible site for an expansion franchise. During the visit the Bettman group met with the Dream Team. In that session Bettman asked Hunt whether he was prepared to go forward with the franchise and the project if the voters turned down Issue 1. Hunt told Bettman that he would not go forward if that happened. Essentially this meant that Columbus would be out of the running if Issue 1 failed. The NHL group was not pleased by Hunt’s response since it had identified Columbus as a very desirable place for a franchise. As the meeting was coming to a close, John McConnell, who had been sitting in, pulled Bettman aside and told him, “Listen, we’re going to make this work. If the referendum fails, we’ll figure out another way to build a building.”

The Voters Decide

As the Issue 1 campaign moved along, endorsements poured forth. Most suburban mayors supported Issue 1—including those in Dublin, Upper Arlington, Bexley, Grandview Heights, Gahanna, New Rome, Hilliard, Valleyview, Harrisburg, Groveport, Marble Cliff, Obetz, Urban Crest, Worthington, and Riverlea. This was great news for the Dream Team. The suburban soccer parents were a group of voters especially targeted by their campaign. Others gave their endorsement as well. Michael Coleman, a Democrat, the president of city council, future Columbus mayor, and a leader in the local African American community, gave his support to Issue 1. The Columbus Educational Association and the Columbus Public School teachers’ union, some five thousand members strong, also supported the cause, saying that the increased job base generated by Issue 1 would be good for local education. Many other civic bodies and prominent players in the community also got on board.

City council president Coleman’s backing was especially prized because two other minority-community leaders—state senate minority leader Ben Espy and state representative Charleta Tavares—opposed Issue 1. Among their reasons for opposition was that the tax money that Issue 1 raised might be needed for education since the state was reexamining the whole issue of how Ohio schools were funded. They also stated that Issue 1 would hurt poor people because they paid a larger share of their income in sales taxes than more affluent citizens. Espy and Tavares pointed out Columbus’s long history of taxpayers’ bailing out projects organized by the
local business leaders. They raised the question of the need for a downtown arena considering the availability of the new Ohio State arena. The opposition was most pleased to have these two state officials on their side because they were highly respected in both the minority community and the wider community.

While the pro-development group won the endorsement war, the weekend before the election it was clear to those following the polls that they would lose the Issue 1 election. The pro-growth group was incredulous. How could the voters not see the wisdom of the proposal? It would cost the average family only another $70 a year in sales tax. Was it not worth it?

The voters said “No.” On election day, despite spending $1.2 million on its campaign compared to only a few thousand by the opposition, the pro-development group lost, 56.3 percent to 43.7 percent. Issue 1 lost in 60 of the city’s 74 wards—especially those that were predominantly Black, working class, and lower-middle class. Issue 1 also lost in 9 of 14 suburbs and in 25 of the 26 outlying townships. The daily paper summed it up when a reporter wrote, “many saw the issue only in terms of taxpayers building a venue for wealthy owners.”

Reactions

In its final form, the passing of Issue 1 would have raised $203.5 million in increased sales taxes over three years. This would have paid two-thirds of the costs of the arena and stadium construction. An additional $57.5 million was to come from private sources, and it was expected that the state of Ohio would contribute $41.5 million more to the project. The city of Columbus would pick up the infrastructure costs required to locate these facilities in the old penitentiary site. To the elite, this sounded like a great deal. Voters did not agree. In fact, it was not a particularly good deal compared to projects in other cities. The average public/private split for other cities was 51 percent/49 percent. The bottom-line split of public/private funding for the Columbus project would run about 85 percent/15 percent.

The Dream Team and the rest of the Titans saw the failure of Issue 1 as much more than just the defeat of a good construction deal. They considered it also to be a loss of a big time sports franchise, a loss of face for the city, and a loss of a major opportunity to reinvigorate downtown. Lamar Hunt said, “This will make it impossible for the National Hockey League to come to Columbus. I’ll say again, we were at the 99.9% level as far as certainty of getting a franchise if the issue had passed.”
Others expressed their disappointment as well. “Columbus,” said a Dispatch editorial, “will continue to miss many top-draw concerts and shows that other major cities enjoy. In the competition to provide an attractive civic environment, Columbus will remain behind places like Cincinnati, Indianapolis and Nashville, Tenn., which invest in this type of civic infrastructure.” Mayor Greg Lashutka simply said, “It’s a huge lost opportunity.” And Columbus developer and Titan Ron Pizzuti complained that “folks think that it’s a fat-cat enterprise, they should know that only eight (NHL) hockey teams made money last year. I think seven made money the year before. This was about the future of downtown and the region.”

The opposition did not gloat but made feisty statements at their victory party. “It’s a credit to the good sense of the Franklin County voters,” noted Mark Higdon, “that they have rejected another bad idea, as they have three or four times before,” VAST cochair Heather Loughley said the results were “a tremendous victory for the people of Franklin County. Once again, the Republican and Democratic politicians of this city joined forces in an effort to raise our taxes. As a Libertarian, I am personally thrilled that the people had the courage to say ‘no’ to their ruthless campaign of bribes and threats. It’s a mandate against corporate welfare. If the politicians come back with some other tax for this purpose, it will be an affront to the voters.”

Clearly, the tax opposition won on Issue 1, and the Dream Team and their downtown pro-growth allies lost. But was the game over? Many local people thought that a “plan B” was waiting in the wings. By that they meant that the Dream Team had planned all along to pay for the construction of their arena and stadium if the public rejected Issue 1. Pro-development insiders maintained that there was no plan B. Members of the opposition leadership said that if there was not already a plan B, then one would very likely emerge.

Word of the defeat of Issue 1 spread quickly to the New York offices of the National Hockey League. Commissioner Gary Bettman called Mayor Greg Lashutka and expressed his disappointment. He asked Lashutka whether there was another way that an arena could be funded. Bettman made it clear—no arena, no franchise, and this was “decision week” for the NHL. A meeting was scheduled in New York for Friday, at which the NHL was to award the expansion franchises. Time was running out fast for the Dream
Team. The NHL committee met on May 9, three days after the Issue 1 defeat, and the members decided to delay any action on the applications for new franchises to give Columbus time to put something together. The next meeting of the NHL’s decision-making group was scheduled for June 25. The Dream Team had a little over a month to find an alternative way to get the hockey franchise.

**Dimon McFerson and Nationwide Step Up**

On the morning after the defeat of Issue 1 the locals were discussing what should or would be done now. Nationwide Insurance CEO and Columbus Titan Dimon McFerson looked down from his office window on the thirty-seventh floor of the Nationwide tower on the degraded Old Pen area that would have been the site for the arena and stadium. When recounting those moments, McFerson said that he thought there had to be another way. He was mindful that an NHL franchise was there for the taking: “We are the largest top-50 city in America without a downtown arena. We need it for the vitality of downtown. We need it for work force development. We need it to support so many other things we are trying to do downtown.”

McFerson quickly decided to carry the ball himself in order to bring the arena to fruition. It simply was too good an opportunity to miss—both for the city and for Nationwide. After all, an arena would help Nationwide in several ways. It would protect the company’s already sizable corporate investment in the north part of downtown. It would provide Nationwide with the Old Pen site, which was ripe for redevelopment. It would enhance Nationwide’s position as a key player in urban redevelopment, both in Columbus and other cities.

Nationwide was a venerable Columbus institution. Since its inception, Nationwide had been part of downtown Columbus. Over the years, as the company grew, it moved from one office building to another. Gradually it consolidated its operations into the northwest section of downtown. In 1951 Nationwide tripled the size of the building it had occupied on North High Street since 1936. In 1978, across the street from its North High Street headquarters, the company completed One Nationwide Plaza, a 40-story tower and the largest, single office building in central Ohio. In 1981 Two Nationwide Plaza, an 18-story building with tenant space, was finished. Three Nationwide Plaza, a 27-story building, was added in 1989, and in 2000 Four Nationwide Plaza opened. It is a 9-story building and, together with the others, provided more than 2.6 million square feet of office space.
In addition to building its corporate-office complex, Nationwide contributed to the redevelopment of this area by constructing six of the sixteen major buildings recently added to this part of the city and by partially financing two others. Including the convention center, which is just a couple of blocks north of the Nationwide corporate complex, the recent building construction in the area totaled more than $700 million.

For McFerson’s arena plan to work, he needed five things. For starters, he needed an NHL franchise for Columbus and a favorable lease with guaranteed heavy use of a new hockey arena. He also needed access to the Old Pen site and to other properties in the area. He needed a favorable deal with the city for tax and infrastructure matters and an independent tie to the downtown leadership that would contribute to the success of the arena and the redevelopment of its neighborhood, which was soon to be called the Arena District.

In a matter of days McFerson took a trip to New York. He met with Gary Bettman of the NHL and told him of his decision to build the arena in order to keep Columbus in the running for a franchise. McFerson, with the assistance of Mayor Lashutka and others, had to help rally the Dream Team ownership group that was experiencing low morale in the wake of the Issue 1 defeat. According to Bettman, McFerson had to have a signed lease commitment before he could proceed with arena plans. The Dream Team ownership group had to have a lease for the arena for the NHL to keep them in the running.

To set the wheels in motion, McFerson presented a draft of a lease to Dream Team leader Lamar Hunt but received little response. With time running out, McFerson presented the lease draft to John H. McConnell, who then signed on as leader of the re-formed ownership group. Access to the Pen site would come from city council, and with Mayor Lashutka’s help this was almost a sure thing. Access to the other properties would come from the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority with its power of eminent domain.

A favorable tax and infrastructure deal with the city was also a certainty. In Nationwide’s past redevelopment activities, the city had been most supportive. For example, in 1975, when Nationwide launched the development of its High Street complex, it made a tax-increment financing (TIF) agreement with the city by which Nationwide would pay its taxes on real estate improvements into a special fund rather than to the schools and other city and county agencies. The city used the special fund to pay for the physical and infrastructural improvements in the blighted area that
Nationwide was revitalizing. These funds were essential for the development of the convention center. Without the city’s arrangement with Nationwide, it is unlikely that the convention center would have been built at that time.

For the needed local independent tie, McFerson brought John Wolfe of the Columbus Dispatch on board for the arena project and the development of the Old Pen site. Nationwide would have a ninety-percent ownership share, and the Dispatch Printing Company would own ten percent. Informed observers saw this as an extremely shrewd move. By securing Wolfe’s support for the project, they also guaranteed favorable treatment in the Dispatch regardless of any problems that might develop. For many years the Dispatch had been active in urban revitalization efforts in downtown, so most locals did not see its involvement in the arena project as unusual. About this John Wolfe said that the Dispatch Printing Company “has unswervingly supported a Downtown arena because of the economic development and quality of life it brings to the city. To be competitive long-term, we need to have these facilities.”

The aggressive role the Dispatch played in Columbus’s revitalization is not surprising. Locally owned newspapers, by their very nature, are place-bound businesses. A newspaper cannot just pick up and move if the local economy suffers a downturn. A newspaper must stick it out and make the best of it. This results in newspapers’ tending to be strong civic boosters. The Dispatch is an extreme example of such boosterism. It not only supports revitalization efforts, but also actually undertakes them itself.

Nationwide presented its arena plan to the city council on June 2, 1997—less than one month after the defeat of Issue 1. Nationwide and the Dispatch proposed to construct a $125 million arena. In return the city council approved for the Nationwide and Dispatch developers a favorable package that included a long list of essential items:

- The city would cover the costs of road and other infrastructure improvements needed for the arena’s development.
- The city would grant the developers a ten-year lease of the Old Pen site with an option to purchase the site at fair-market value during the seventh year.
- The city council would declare the arena site to be a blighted area so that the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority could
acquire private parcels of land at the site through its use of eminent domain.

- The FCCFA would lease the acquired land to the developers for ninety-nine years.

- The arena site would be exempted from real estate taxes. The developers would set aside a portion of ticket revenues (collected as a surcharge) to pay the Columbus public schools for any property taxes they would have received from the arena site.

- The city would complete an environmental cleanup of the Pen site. Later the site would be paved for parking, and a portion of the parking fees would be paid to the city.

Everyone understood that the deal hinged on the granting of an NHL franchise to Columbus: no team, no city council deal with the developers. The developers hoped to raise $44 million of their $125-million investment from the sale of seat licenses and luxury suites. Nationwide retained the naming rights for the arena. Naming rights are valuable; in the context of Issue 1, Bank One would have paid $35 million for them. However, with the defeat of Issue 1, Bank One unceremoniously withdrew its support from any further arena developments. The Bank One spokesperson said, “The contract was very specific. The money was for naming of the stadium, arena, and plaza in downtown Columbus. It was always understood that if the issue were to lose, . . . the offer is off the table. . . . We operate in twelve states, and we’re looking for similar marketing opportunities in all of them. If we don’t spend it at Front and Nationwide, we will spend it elsewhere.”

Bank One did spend it elsewhere. It bought the naming rights of the newly completed baseball stadium in Phoenix. From this point on, Bank One, formerly a significant player in the Columbus downtown games, was out of the picture. Some insiders said that, had the Columbus McCoy family still controlled Bank One as it had in the past, the company would have continued to support the private funding of the arena.

**The Elite Fall Out, and John McConnell Steps Up**

The defeat of Issue 1 left the Dream Team in disarray. Lamar Hunt was not interested in a privately funded arena, but John McConnell and others were
willing to try it if Nationwide was willing to provide the capital. From all reports, immediately after the election, there was very little communication between Hunt and the others in the ownership group. Hunt, who had led the group during the campaign, returned to Kansas City. Meanwhile in Columbus, Mayor Greg Lashutka, John McConnell, John Wolfe, and the other Titans hurriedly tried to develop a plan to stay in the hunt for a hockey franchise.

With time running out, Nationwide presented the arena lease to Hunt as the leader of the ownership group. However, Hunt had problems with some elements of the lease and did not sign. Meanwhile, he had been talking to community leaders in northern Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. They told Hunt that they would provide him an arena at no charge if he would bring a team there.

Hunt’s refusal to act on the lease did not sit well with Nationwide. With time for the lease signing about to expire, Nationwide presented a lease to John McConnell with more favorable terms than those presented to Hunt.23 Hunt had not told McConnell that Nationwide and Hunt had been discussing a lease. McConnell first heard of the lease when McFerson contacted him. McFerson later said that he turned to McConnell in a last-minute effort to salvage the franchise opportunity. McConnell signed the lease as the leader of a reorganizing ownership group named Columbus Hockey (COLHOC) Limited Partners. With the signed lease, Nationwide approached the city council for its approval.

On June 4, the NHL deadline for Columbus to get its arena plan in place, McConnell had the arena lease in hand and submitted the franchise application under his own name to the NHL. The new ownership group maintained that the door was left open for Hunt to join them as long as Hunt understood that McConnell would be the managing partner. Hunt refused to join the new ownership group. There was some confusion at NHL headquarters as to who spoke for the Columbus application, but the league was pleased by McConnell’s application. To the NHL, McConnell seemed to be the right man for the franchise.

On June 17 the NHL expansion committee recommended that Columbus enter the league with a franchise in the 2000–2001 season. Also on June 17 John McConnell and Wolfe Enterprises filed a lawsuit in Franklin County Common Pleas Court against Hunt. They claimed that Hunt had misrepresented the original investors (COLHOC) in his dealings with Nationwide. McConnell and Wolfe claimed that Hunt had breached his agreement with the other members of the ownership group by saying that the lease’s terms
were unacceptable and allowing the deadline to slide past without even responding to Nationwide. The suit also alleged that, on the day before the expansion committee meeting, Hunt requested that the NHL not award Columbus a franchise until the local ownership situation was clarified. The McConnell and Wolfe suit asked the judge to declare that the locals could acquire a team without Hunt.24

Hunt had twenty-eight days to respond to the lawsuit but took only a week. He did so by filing a countersuit. On June 23, two days before the NHL’s executive board was to meet and finally award franchises, Hunt filed suit in Franklin County Common Pleas Court. His suit alleged that McConnell and Wolfe had violated their original agreement with him and that McConnell did not have the right to set up the second ownership group. The suit asked that Hunt be awarded the present-day value of the projected profits of the hockey team and arena for the next twenty-five years.

The next day, June 24, Gary Bettman of the NHL met with McConnell and Hunt in an attempt to resolve the ownership dispute between the two, but they produced no resolution. The next day, June 25, the NHL board approved both Columbus as a site for an expansion team and John McConnell as the controlling partner of the franchise.

Columbus’s pro-growth interests generally were jubilant, as were the Titans and the local sports enthusiasts. A local team-naming contest was held, and the “Blue Jackets” won. Starting in the fall of 2000, then, the Columbus Blue Jackets would be playing their home matches in the Nationwide Arena. John McConnell became both an owner and a local hero.25

Not everyone was happy with the outcome, however. The lawsuits between Hunt and McConnell and Wolfe dragged on for two more years. Court decisions, appeals, depositions, and testimony regularly appeared in the local papers. Hunt also filed a suit in New York against Nationwide and the NHL for their roles in helping the McConnell group get the franchise. After both sides argued their cases through late autumn of 1999, exhaustion won out. Both sides agreed to quit and go their own way. Hunt formally concluded things by withdrawing his suit in the New York court.

The net result of all the maneuvering in and out of court was that the Columbus Dream Team Titans got their franchise without any strings to Hunt, and Hunt was squeezed out of the hockey franchise with nothing to show for it except lawyers’ fees. The NHL put a franchise into a strong market; Nationwide got its shot at further redeveloping the downtown. And McFerson and McConnell became larger-than-life local heroes.
The Odyssey for the Soccer Stadium

The arena scramble that followed the rejection of Issue 1 did not include any consideration of a soccer stadium for Hunt’s team, the Columbus Crew. Hunt and his soccer franchise were now on their own. For the Crew, Columbus was too good a market to leave. A playing facility had to be found in short order, however, because the allowed time for the Crew’s playing at Ohio State’s stadium was running out fast. Jamey Rootes, the Columbus Crew team president, commented about finding a new home for the Crew, “I think it has now become an appropriate priority. I know it is for us and I think it is for the city too.”

The Crew had been playing home games at Ohio Stadium. It was accommodating of the university to open its facilities to the new soccer franchise. However, for several reasons it would not be particularly good for the Crew to stay there in the long run. The stadium floor was not the right size for soccer; the stadium’s huge seating capacity worked against the right ambiance for soccer—in a venue that seats 90,000 people, a soccer crowd of 15,000 seems minuscule. For Crew night games, temporary lights had to be rented, trucked in, and set up at cost to the Crew of $20,000 per
game. Parking and concessions income, normally significant moneymakers for teams, went to the university. Furthermore, as a student athletic facility, the stadium did not sell alcoholic beverages, also a significant moneymaker for most stadium operators.

On top of all this was the fact that the stadium was scheduled to undergo a major overhaul and expansion that would necessitate the Crew’s playing elsewhere for a couple of seasons. However, Ohio State’s athletic director, Andy Geiger, and its president, E. Gordon Gee, facing heavy costs for the expansion and other construction projects, wanted to continue the connection with the Crew for financial reasons. The university suggested that the Crew’s concerns about the stadium plant be incorporated into the remodeling plans. The university also suggested that, as an alternative, it could expand its new track and soccer stadium to twenty thousand seats to meet the Crew’s attendance expectations.

Something had to happen soon on the new soccer stadium front because the Crew had only one season left to play in Ohio Stadium. With the defeat of Issue 1, the team began a series of informal conversations with officials of suburban communities along the metropolitan area’s interstate beltway, I-270. This arc of communities was called the “soccer belt” because of the rapid growth of youth soccer programs there and the increasing popularity of scholastic soccer for both boys and girls. These communities had supported Issue 1 and were home to the stereotypical “soccer moms and dads.” One of these suburbs now had a chance to become home to the Crew. Early on, the affluent suburb of Dublin emerged as a leading contender. No stranger to professional sports, Dublin was the setting of Jack Nicklaus’s Muirfield Village Golf Club and the site of the Professional Golf Association’s annual Memorial Tournament.

By the end of September 1997 the Dublin city staff had briefed the city council on their talks with the Hunt group. Hunt signed a letter of intent to build a 30,000–35,000-seat stadium in the community. He envisioned the stadium as being expandable to 60,000 seats. The suggested 180-acre site was just west of the city, and Dublin proposed to buy it and annex it to the city. Annexation was possible if the county government would approve the transfer of the land, and that was likely to happen. The land would then be leased to the Hunt Sports Group, which would build and operate the stadium. Hunt would lease the land for $10 per year. The initial lease would be for 25 years and renewable for another 25. When the 50-year lease expired, the stadium would become city property.

The question that Dublin residents most frequently asked about this
The purchase of the 180 acres would be Dublin’s responsibility and would cost the city $30 million. The city would use its right of eminent domain to acquire the land and would then lease it to the Crew. The Hunt Group would construct a no-frills stadium for $26.5 million. The annual debt service would be $1.9 million on a 25–30 year mortgage. To finance the construction, a non-profit sports-development corporation would be formed, and they would sell taxable public bonds. Hunt would be the guarantor of the bonds. The City of Dublin would cover the infrastructure costs—constructing roads and extending water and sewer service. This would cost the city $10.6 million. The road construction would be paid for by property taxes generated by the stadium. Water and sewer lines would be financed through the city’s current budget. Dublin would also have to provide off-site traffic control for at least twenty soccer events per year at a cost of $90,000. The city would pay Hunt another $62,500 per year to hold up to ten community events in the stadium.

Dublin’s city council held a public hearing over the proposal, and six hundred residents attended. They seemed to be split pro and con. The arguments that night and in the ensuing months resembled those of the Issue 1 campaign of the preceding spring. Dublin residents were worried about traffic, noise, area flooding because of overdevelopment, alcohol sales, the possibility of the MSL folding or the Crew moving, the effect of spin-off development of hotels, bars, restaurants, and the like on city congestion and infrastructure and were also concerned about how the city’s share of the costs would be covered without raising taxes in the future. The Dublin schools were concerned about the diversion of property-tax money from the stadium development into the provision for road servicing.

The city council had every intention of deciding the issue, apparently in favor. However, a group of citizens opposed to the plan drafted a petition and obtained enough signatures by November 11, 1997, to bring the matter to a public vote in February 1998. The pro-stadium forces organized a political-action committee to support their cause and were largely funded by the Crew and Major League Soccer. The opposition had fewer funds, but it well understood the mindset of the Dublin residents. As the pro- and anti-stadium groups contended with each other, the city of Dublin set about acquiring land for the stadium.

This venture was to come to naught, however. On February 10, the Dublin voters turned down the Hunt stadium deal 59 percent to 41 percent. Hunt now had to decide what to do next—the Crew needed the stadium in
a little more than a year. The city of Dublin now had to decide what to do with the land it had acquired.

The next suburb to come forward was Gahanna. It too is located on the I-270 soccer belt. Gahanna was situated next to the metropolitan area’s principal airport—Port Columbus. The land that Gahanna officials would have liked to develop for the stadium was adjacent to the airport. The airport authority caught wind of Gahanna’s plan, however, and moved quickly to squash the community’s hopes. The authority used its right of eminent domain to take the 122 acres of land, explaining that those acres were too close to the airport’s landing and takeoff paths to be used for other purposes. The authority did not want a large structure and stadium lights creating a hazard for its air operations. It also knew that, sooner or later, the stadium managers and fans would complain about the takeoff and landing noise generated by the scheduled air traffic. Those complaints would put the authority in the middle of a noise conflict that could drag on for quite a long time.

Whatever was to happen next would have to be done without a public vote on a stadium. With the Dublin defeat and the earlier Issue 1 loss, the Hunt group was 0 for 2 in stadium referenda. Hunt’s people met with the state of Ohio’s economic development officials late in March. They suggested that the Hunt group look at the state fairgrounds (Ohio Expo Center) as a possible site and sent them to see officials at the Ohio Exposition Commission who controlled the fairgrounds. The north side of the fairgrounds had large parking lots and plenty of room for development. To be sure, the Ohio Historical Society’s museum was located there as was Ohio Village, the society’s reconstruction of a small Ohio village of the 1800s. The Historical Society’s board of trustees had planned to build a warehouse and a service facility in the area, but there was ample space for location flexibility on the property.

The Expo Center land was a good choice. Interstate highway I-71 runs just by the east border of the center. It connects Columbus to Cleveland to the north and Cincinnati to the south. Interstate entrance and exit ramps lead directly to the fairgrounds entrance. The heart of downtown is only ten minutes to the south on I-71, and OSU is only about six blocks to the west. The Expo Center is surrounded by old working-class neighborhoods, but with the configuration of the freeway and the fairgrounds, those areas would be separated from the stadium. Tim Connolly, president of Hunt Sports Group, said, “there is ‘no down side’ to this site. It is in the heart of Columbus. It is in the city limits of Columbus. Mayor Lashutka wants to keep it in Columbus. When you are six or eight blocks from Ohio State,
you’re in the middle of things.” Others disagreed, however. The site sat too far from downtown to be a part of the city center’s renewal. The construction of a stadium there would fall outside the domain of the downtown redevelopment game. Hunt would be free to do whatever he wanted in developing the soccer stadium as long as it was within the limits the Exposition Commission set.

Discussions between the Hunt group and the Expo Center representatives went well. The proposed deal was that the Expo commission would lease to the Crew 12–14 acres in the north parking lot of the fairgrounds for 25 years at a cost of $50,000 annually, plus about 25 percent of the parking income, which would amount to about $120,000 per year. The lease would be renewable for another 25 years and would give the Crew the right to construct and operate the stadium. Soon Hunt would construct a 22,500-seat stadium that could be used not only for soccer but also for concerts, high school football, and other sports such as lacrosse and field hockey. The construction cost would be $15 million–$17 million. Hunt would sign a guarantee to cover all of the construction costs. If the Crew should leave town or if Major League Soccer should fold, then the stadium corporation would be allowed to find another major tenant. If that failed or if the Crew was unable to pay the annual lease fee, the Expo Center would have the right to take ownership of the stadium or to demand that it be torn down and the site returned to its previous state. Also, the Crew would minimize events at the stadium during the two weeks the state fair was held. This way, the traffic congestion that soccer games generated would not be detrimental to the free flow of fair attendees.

This type of lease was new to the commission, so the members undertook a study of stadium leases. This was during the period of the lawsuits between Hunt and the Dream Team over the hockey franchise. In Columbus, while support for the Crew and its young, personable president and general manager, Jamey Rootes, held firm, people were beginning to see Hunt as a sports entrepreneur pure and simple. They feared he had little commitment to the city or to the well-being of downtown. In fact, one commission member said that “Lamar Hunt has a history of being litigious. Lamar Hunt sued some of the city’s patriarchs.” He added that Hunt’s “Texas lease negotiator was arrogant and pugnacious. These wealthy owners get wealthy because they get such good leases. I feel we’ve sold our birthright for a bowl of porridge.”

Nonetheless, the consultants reported favorably on the proposed lease and on May 15, 1998 the Ohio Exposition Commission voted 6 to 2 for
entering into the lease with the Hunt group. With the specific site firmed up by agreement with Historical Society and the lease approved, the state’s Administrative Services and the Governor, as required by law, signed approval of the deal. Ground breaking was held in August and the stadium was ready for play May 13, 1999. Hunt and the Crew had their stadium and Hunt’s Columbus odyssey had come to an end.

Aftermath

The events following the Issue 1 battle may be characterized as a “win-win” situation because the key players got all or most of what they wanted. The Dream Team got its hockey franchise. The tax-opposition group continued its string of victories by defeating yet another arena tax. Nationwide built a nationally acclaimed arena and acquired the rights to further redevelop its corner of downtown. By the fall of 1991, the Arena District was moving ahead. It had the arena. It had added bars, restaurants, and office buildings, and housing was coming down the line. The district also boasted a beautiful greenspace mall. It had a green light from the Columbus Downtown Commission to build a multiscreen movie theater with 1,800 seats. This would be the only movie theater downtown, and it included appealing features such as leather seats in the balcony and the most sophisticated sound system in town. The older theaters had been renovated and were now sites for plays, musicals, and concerts.

With the development of the Old Pen site on Neil Avenue, the street dividing the Arena District from the area to its immediate west had become known as Pen West. Here a $5.5-million entertainment venue was constructed that would hold events whose audiences would be too small for the Nationwide arena or that required an intimate performance space—2,500 for indoor concerts and 4,000 for outdoor. In addition, developers were in the early stages of floating plans for replacing the aged industrial structures in Pen West with new housing and office construction.

The Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority had backed an arena since its inception. With the Nationwide arena’s fruition, the FCCFA proceeded with an $81-million major expansion of the convention center that increased its size from 1 million square feet to 1.275 million. The convention center is just up the street from the Nationwide office complex and the arena. Its expansion would further contribute to the redevelopment of the northern part of downtown. As a result of the increased convention
space, more hotel rooms, more restaurant meals, more drinks, more parking fees, more tickets to downtown performances, and more bed-tax income would all enhance the downtown economy.

Also, with the defeat of Issue 1, OSU felt free to develop its arena without constraints. During the campaign, in a spirit of cooperation with the downtown elite, the university’s administration had agreed to exclude from its arena luxury boxes that would compete for corporate dollars with the Issue 1 arena. With the defeat of the issue and the apparent evaporation of downtown competition, Ohio State considered all bets to be off. In building the Value City Arena in its new Schottenstein Center, the university included state-of-the-art luxury boxes that were aggressively marketed to the Columbus business community. Seat-licensing arrangements were developed that rivaled the potential profitability of those for new arenas in other cities.

Once Dimon McFerson made his move to build a privately financed arena, the university administration knew that it had only a two-year lead on the likely competition and took advantage of it by bringing in very high-profile concerts and performers. These events, together with OSU basketball and hockey, established the university’s arena as a great venue for any type of major performance or event—from Luciano Pavarotti (opera) to Michael Flatley (dance) to Rickey Martin (pop) to giant trucks (good ol’ boys). With the success of the university’s arena, it became common in Columbus to speak of the possibility of “dueling arenas” when the Nationwide facility came on line.

Time has shown that competition certainly exists between the two arenas. Nevertheless, when important matters arise, the downtown elite still can have a say in university arena matters. Take, for example, the Tim McGraw–Faith Hill concert. These two Nashville performers were on a smash tour in 2000, and both OSU and Nationwide wanted to book them. Indeed, Nationwide wanted them as the headliner act for the arena’s opening, so Dimon McFerson called Ohio State’s new president, Brit Kirwan, and asked that OSU not sign the act so that the grand opening of Nationwide’s arena would not be diminished. Kirwan acquiesced.30

Lamar Hunt was a winner in one way, but a loser in another. On the plus side, he built his stadium and secured the future of the Crew in Columbus for many years. Indeed, the stadium was acclaimed to be a soccer gem, as it was the first stadium in major league soccer built especially for that sport. However, Hunt missed out on the hockey-ownership possibility and also lost a lot of local good will. To many in Columbus, he was
the adventuresome outsider who failed to play ball with the local Titans in the downtown revitalization game; thus he became relegated to being a perpetual outsider.

Moving On

The downtown redevelopment game had been played for many years before Issue 1 and continues to be played to this day. However, as in all games some players come and go, and some change positions in the game. This is true in Columbus as well. We have mentioned some of these transitions in previous chapters, but it is desirable to summarize them here. In May 2000, Dimon McFerson announced his retirement from Nationwide. At the time he was considered a major winner in the city’s civic game, and he said he planned to continue to be involved in civic events. This included his acceptance of an appointment to OSU’s board of trustees, where he became one of OSU president Brit Kirwan’s bosses.

John McConnell, the businessman who was praised for bringing professional hockey to Columbus, received the highest award possible in the local civic game. In October 1998 he was voted a member of the Columbus Hall of Fame. He joined forty-one other local luminaries including painter George Wesley Bellows; Eddie Rickenbacker, World War I flying ace and airline executive; James Thurber, writer and cartoonist; Howard “Hopalong” Cassady, Heisman trophy winner; Nancy Wilson, singer and entertainer; and R. David (“Dave”) Thomas, founder of Wendy’s. McConnell is also known locally for his contributions to charity. For example, he donated several million dollars to Grant/Riverside Hospital for the creation of the McConnell Heart Health Center. He also pledged that his profits from the Blue Jackets would go to charity.31

Upon completion of his last term of office, Greg Lashutka, the popular mayor of Columbus and tireless worker to bring professional sports to the city, was appointed senior vice president of government and community relations at Nationwide. He also was a member of Nationwide’s executive management council.

In January 2000 Titan Ron Pizzuti—Lashutka’s partner in chasing professional sports—entered into a major deal with Nationwide Realty Investors, which was designed to create a $1-billion portfolio. Nationwide took a major equity position in Pizzuti Companies. This deal gave Nationwide part ownership in $400-million properties developed by Pizzuti in Orlando, Jacksonville, Chicago, Indianapolis, and Columbus. Nationwide
also planned to direct another $600 million through Pizzuti.\textsuperscript{32}

In June 1997 Ohio State president Gee resigned his position there and took the presidency of Brown University—a little more than a month after Issue 1 failed. Gee said, “This opportunity at Brown will not come again.”\textsuperscript{33} After a very short stay at Brown, Gee moved on to the presidency of Vanderbilt University.

In March 2002 Gee’s replacement, William “Brit” Kirwan, announced that he would be leaving Ohio State to take up a larger challenge as chancellor of the university system of Maryland. Kirwan cited the added advantage of being close to his grandchildren in Maryland. In April Kirwan was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

OSU’s Andy Geiger continued to pursue the expansion of the university’s athletic facilities where major cost overruns in the arena’s construction and the renovation of Ohio Stadium created budget woes. Nonetheless, he remained popular in the community and served on several blue-ribbon citizens groups.

With the end of the lawsuits between Hunt and the Dream Team and the construction of the Crew’s stadium, Lamar Hunt faded far into the background of the Columbus civic scene. Jamey Rootes, the Crew president and general manager who did the heavy lifting in developing the Crew Stadium, moved to Houston, where he became senior vice president and chief sales and marketing officer for the Houston Texans, the NFL’s expansion franchise that was scheduled to begin play in the 2002 season. With his efforts, the Texans sold seventy-five percent of the suites and seats in the new 69,000-seat Reliant Energy Stadium.\textsuperscript{34} Rootes was well on his way to becoming a major player in the big time sports game.

Richard Sheir, “arena slayer” and leader of the opposition to Issue 1, continued his civic involvement. In 1999 the regional transit authority, COTA, had two issues on the ballot for November, each of which asked for a sales-tax increase that would fund expanded bus service and the development of light rail. Sheir claimed that in the long run this would be a $2-billion deal. He rallied the tax opposition once again and fought a hard battle. The issue, involving a ten-year tax increase, was defeated, essentially scuttling light-rail mass transit in Columbus for the foreseeable future. This was another victory for Sheir, but it was to be his last in Columbus. In June 2001 Richard Sheir announced that he was retiring as a political activist and moving with his wife and daughter to a small town in Vermont, where he could live a quieter life. In parting, he said about the Issue 1 campaign, “the personal reward is driving next to the Arena District and knowing it was
built the way it should be. But I’m not waiting for my comp tickets at the window.”

Sheir’s opponent in the Issue 1 battle, Doug Kridler, was gracious about Sheir’s departure. Sheir had, said Kridler, “an eye for opportunity and a flair for the dramatic. If he wasn’t always logical or on point, he was always on message—his message.” Kridler himself moved on as well. In February 2002 he was appointed CEO of the Columbus Foundation, one of the nation’s foremost, city-focused philanthropic organizations. In Columbus, the CEO of the foundation is at the top of the philanthropic game.

As the dust settled from the Issue 1 fight, it became clear that the Arena District had great promise as a redevelopment project. Beyond that, the rest of downtown redevelopment was lagging. It was also clear that the arena was but one successful project and that many more were needed. In the next chapter we describe what was happening downtown beyond the Arena District.