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## Hockey Arena Dreams Need Cold Cash

**Ice hockey venues are envisioned for downtown and the Austin Pike interchange with I-75**

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Staff Writer

DAYTON — Making a hockey arena work downtown or on Montgomery County's southern border at the proposed Austin Landing will require some key pieces, according to experts and local officials.

The big piece is money. The cost is estimated at under \$30 million for a downtown arena housing the Dayton Bombers, and \$60 million to \$100 million for a hockey arena and events center at the Austin Pike interchange slated for Interstate 75.

"People should dream. They should have big ideas. But it has to be sustainable and you have to be able to pay for it," said state Sen. Jon Husted, R-Kettering. "But we can't afford two arenas. That I'm pretty sure of."

He and state Rep. Clayton Luckie, D-Dayton, said the financially strapped state has no money to offer. The city and Montgomery County are also in difficult financial straits.

"Under any scenario this would not be a predominantly publicly funded facility," said City Manager Rashad Young, admitting he is excited about the prospect of a downtown arena but cautions that a market study must prove there is demand for it.

"If you build this thing for people will they actually come?" Young said. "And you have to build that into the financial framework."

Both arena projects require feasibility studies, financing plans, guaranteed tenants and solid revenue streams, experts say.

The Bombers would be a tenant for the downtown arena, an undetermined American Hockey League team is envisioned for Austin Landing, and both hope to draw youth hockey leagues hungry for ice time and willing to pay.

"(Ice facilities) are among the most expensive to build and the most expensive to operate. It's hard to make money off them," said Julie Skolnicki, the Columbus-based regional vice president of Brailsford and Dunlavy, a Washington, D.C., facilities planning and program management firm.

"If you can get the money, now is a good time to bid out the project," Skolnicki said. "(Lenders) are looking a lot harder at these feasibility studies and making sure the revenue streams and cost projections are tight so that financing can be approved."

She said in the current economic downturn, the smaller venues that provide an affordable family experience will attract customers.

Successful sporting venues need demographics that work, with the ability to draw money from other counties, not just shift entertainment dollars within the county, said Marc Poitras, associate professor of economics at the University of Dayton.

"The basic reason is people have a certain amount of leisure income that they spend," said Andrew Zimbalist, a sports economist at Smith College in Massachusetts.

It is a plus for both projects that the area north of Cincinnati has "incredibly strong" demographics, said Skolnicki.

"And the (Dayton) Dragons (baseball team) has been such an incredible success story I think it's making everybody take a second look at the Dayton demographics," she said. "It would not hurt to have a similar sort of family entertainment sports venue in an opposite season."

Zimbalist said the sports venues are "very unlikely to be an economic development tool" because independent studies show that alone they do not create jobs or income. He said the ones that do work to bring new money to an area are those that become destinations with additional attractions.

But local officials believe arenas could become entertainment destinations and economic engines for the region. The county will complete a feasibility study for the Austin Landing idea by the end of the month.

"At the end of the day, our focus is to bring jobs to Montgomery County, and the Austin Landing is one of the strategies that we believe is an important part to bringing those jobs to Montgomery County," county Administrator Deborah Feldman said. "We believe downtown is another extremely important leg to the region for that economic development."