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Why Cobo deal works for Detroit

By Kwame Kenyatta

The Cobo Hall proposal was not great from the very beginning, mainly because it did not gain Detroit lawmakers' buy-in from its inception. But like any other proposal there are good and bad points.

Cobo Hall is not a core service. It is a convention center. Whether Cobo Hall stays under the control of the City of Detroit or is transferred to a regional authority, it will not improve the quality of life in Detroit's neighborhoods.

A viable Cobo Hall, completely renovated and expanded, will improve the level and quality of businesses in the downtown area and the region. Convention planners do not choose to go to a city because of its convention center alone. They choose the city based on the level of activities that that city and its region can provide and whether there is a convention center that can meet their needs. Planners are also concerned about safety, transportation and the reputation of that city.

The fight around Public Act 554 of 2008, Senate Bill 1630 should have taken place months ago. But it did not. There was quiet disagreement voiced here and there. But no resolutions from City Council were composed. And no organized trips to Lansing or mass public hearings were organized prior to the Act or the Bill's passage.

Now, in the final hour, led by the Council President, Detroiters are being mobilized to support the position that voting this down is in the best interest of the City of Detroit.

Voting not to transfer Cobo Hall means we get to keep ownership. However, the question is, ownership of what?

Ownership of a facility that is debt ridden and in disrepair.

Ownership of a facility that costs taxpayers over \$15 million a year out of the general fund to maintain while the city faces a \$300 million deficit.

The City has owned Cobo Hall for nearly 50 years, since its opening in 1960. Recent reports show that the roof is leaking, the docks are in disrepair, doors are not opening and electrical wires are hanging, along with a host of other items. We have not maintained Cobo Hall. We have not fixed it up nor are we able to finance the cost of expansion.

Under our ownership, two past directors of Cobo Hall who held their posts from 1996-2004 and 2004-2007 respectively have admitted to taking bribes and pleaded guilty to felonies.

The FBI is currently investigating other financial abnormalities that have taken place at Cobo Hall under our ownership involving contracts that were entered into by the City under the previous administration and approved by this body.

I am told that I will lose support and may not be reelected because of my vote. I do not cast votes to get back in office nor to keep or win support. I cast my vote solely based on all of the available information and what I believe is in the best interest of the residents of the City of Detroit.

Cobo Hall is not the end of the road for the City of Detroit. But it could be for those who would exploit the fears and compassion of the people.

Based on all the information that I have gathered thus far, it will be the Governor and the State Legislature, both of whom crafted the Cobo Hall deal, who will also oversee the allocation of federal economic stimulus funds.

Both branches of government have made it clear that they will not distribute monies from that fund for Cobo Hall. And I do not believe that there is a bona-fide avenue for us to appeal to President Obama's office and expect \$300 million to be provided directly to the City of Detroit for Cobo Hall when there are other much more pressing matters in the City that desperately need funding.

Finally, whether we keep Cobo Hall or transfer it to an authority, the real issue is the steadily declining quality of life in the City of Detroit.

The question that I continue to pose is how do we as leaders improve the quality of life for the people in the City of Detroit? That is my focus.

Kwame Kenyatta is a member of the Detroit City Council.
