

Heading off convention center debacle

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By Stephen Adams

In "The Charge of the Light Brigade," Alfred Lord Tennyson tells the story of 600 loyal cavalrymen who rode bravely to certain death on ill-considered orders from superiors. The plight of the 600—"theirs not to reason why/theirs but to do or die"—brings to mind the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority. The authority's staff is responsible for building and operating the new Boston Convention and Exhibition Center as well as the Hynes Convention Center. While there may yet be a chance to turn the tide, circumstances now look bad for both.

Boosters of the new convention center have claimed it would spark development on the South Boston waterfront. Its 1.6 million square feet of state-of-the-art exhibition space would lure thousands of conventioners, 4,000 new hotel rooms and plentiful retail and commercial activity. With construction complete, however, it is now clear the convention center will not spur development of the waterfront anytime soon.

As the grand opening of the new hall approaches, the facility is expected to produce only 29 to 42 shows per year— and these won't materialize before 2010. That's a far cry from the 64 per year originally predicted by the project's supporters. As for new hotels, while the convention center is set to open next week, only the subsidized headquarters hotel has just broken ground. One trade show planner told the Globe, "It's out there in the middle of nowhere, without shops, without hotels, without restaurants."

Across town, the authority's other charge, the Hynes Convention Center, lies in the shadow of the auction block. Years of inefficient management produced large deficits. But, set in the heart of a bustling tourist area and surrounded by hotels, restaurants and shops, the Hynes is well positioned to serve the mid-size convention market. However, in the face of a tight trade show market, the authority's management is diverting lucrative shows from the Hynes to the new hall—and even siphoning business from the privately owned Bayside Expo Center.

Had politicians considered such dismal prospects before construction, the new convention center would have never been built. Nevertheless, the authority has its orders. "I don't think I know the science of what they did back then...it is not important to us," agency's boss Jim Rooney told the Globe.

Like Tennyson's cavalry, "theirs not to reason why." So Rooney and his staff soldier on, bringing the massive project in on time and only slightly over budget only to face a scarcity of shows. Meanwhile, the Commonwealth prepares to sell off the Hynes, even though it is ideally suited for the convention market.

At the very least, we should not repeat the mistakes made by public managers of the Hynes. The convention business is extremely competitive and specialized. While Boston Convention and Exhibition Center staff did a great job building the facility, we should not expect Rooney & Co. to become experts in the intricacies of the convention industry. One would not ask the contractor who builds the surgical wing of a hospital to become chief of surgery. It is critical that experienced private sector managers be retained to run the BCEC.

There is yet the chance to rescue taxpayers from both the Hynes and the BCEC debacles. One option comes from a private project on a site adjacent to the new convention center. Developers recently received the green light on a 1.2 million square foot mix of residential, hotel,

supermarket, parking and commercial activity, anchored by a 600,000 square foot retail mall, at a cost of \$400 million.

Could these developers be enticed to spend just a fraction of that \$400 million to retrofit and lease the convention center from the state? The new retail mall might fit nicely inside the 516,000 square foot main hall. Surely, the remaining one million square feet of space could accommodate the supermarket and commercial activity envisioned by private developers. And there is certainly room for the 1,750 proposed parking spaces within the massive convention center footprint. Finding an economic use for the BCEC albatross allows the Hynes to remain open to attract the mid-size convention market it serves so well.

The Massachusetts Convention Center Authority is charging ahead with the new convention center, hoping against hope for a revived tradeshow market. Boston would be better served with a new battle plan built on today's market realities.

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