

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

Wisconsin Center's Marty Brooks criticizes FPC Live proposal and Milwaukee Bucks role



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Marty Brooks..“As the CEO I have a responsibility in keeping the board appraised about business opportunities as well as business challenges.”

KENNY YOO/MBJ

Wisconsin Center District president and CEO Marty Brooks joined the list of concert-venue owners and operators opposing FPC Live’s proposed venues in the Deer District – and added a dose of criticism for the Milwaukee Bucks’ role in the potential project.

Brooks earlier this year made statements against FPC Live’s proposal for venues just west of the Summerfest grounds in Milwaukee’s Third Ward. Madison-based FPC Live in May dropped its Third Ward plans and announced with the Bucks a proposed live-entertainment venue just north of Fiserv Forum on the site of the now-demolished BMO Harris Bradley Center.

The public Wisconsin Center District owns the Miller High Life Theatre in downtown Milwaukee where concerts are being booked by Pabst Theater Group under a five-year contract. The district also owns UW Milwaukee Panther Arena and the Wisconsin Center convention facility.

Brooks included an update on his concerns Friday during the Wisconsin Center District board meeting. The Bucks and FPC Live, which is minority-owned by Live Nation Entertainment (NYSE: LYV), formed a joint venture for two venues, one with a capacity of 4,000 and the other with 800 capacity.

“The Live Nation venues will be in direct competition with the Miller High Life Theatre and will likely destroy the concert opportunity that PTG (Pabst Theater Group) has in running Miller High Life Theatre,” Brooks said.

Brooks, like other opponents of the FPC Live proposal, said Live Nation’s policy is to book tours the company promotes in concert facilities Live Nation owns or leases. That will take away shows from similar-size venues in Milwaukee that currently host Live Nation/ FPC Live-promoted tours, he said.

Miller High Life Theatre, which has a capacity of about 4,000, is about one block south of the proposed FPC Live venue in the Deer District. The Panther Arena on Aug. 16

hosted a Live Nation/FPC Live-promoted concert with rocker Jack White that drew about 4,000 fans, Brooks said.

“These (FPC Live) venues will ... simply be re-directing shows from the Miller High Life Theatre and other venues for a zero net economic impact for the city,” Brooks said.

Before the project can proceed, a detailed plan needs approval from the Milwaukee Plan Commission, the Common Council’s zoning committee and the full Common Council. That process may start in September.

A group called Save MKE’s Music Scene, which is led by Milwaukee lobbyist Craig Peterson, came out Thursday against the FPC Live Deer District proposal. The group includes Pabst Theater Group, The Rave/ Eagles Ballroom, Shank Hall, the Cactus Club and the Milwaukee Turners, who own Pabst Theater Group-operated Turner Hall Ballroom.

Brooks said he learned of FPC Live's Deer District proposal only from news media reports. He said the fact his organization wasn’t involved in the discussion was “kind of putting it in our face” because of the Wisconsin Center District’s role in financing the Bucks arena and the district's ongoing relationship with the Bucks and their business arm Deer District LLC as landlord of Fiserv Forum.

“We have an exceptional relationship with the Bucks,” Brooks said. “I believe the partnership between the Bucks and Live Nation is a show of bad faith to our organization, the city, county and state.”

The Bucks received \$250 million in public funding toward the new arena and nearby improvements under a funding package approved by the Wisconsin Legislature and then-Gov. Scott Walker. The legislation called for the Wisconsin Center District to provide \$93 million funded through borrowing.

The Bucks arena funding legislation also imposed a \$2 surcharge on tickets for arena events with 75% going to the Wisconsin Center District and 25% to the state. Also, the Wisconsin Center District collects a lease payment of over \$1 million per year from the Bucks.

In response to a request for comment, Milwaukee Bucks and Fiserv Forum president said his organization is “strongly committed to the creation of new opportunities for Milwaukee.”

“Whether it’s the expansion of the convention center, which we strongly supported, the exciting prospect of the Iron District, the beautiful upcoming Trade Hotel, the dramatic forthcoming Milwaukee Public Museum, or, in conjunction with FPC Live, the first modern general admission venues in the market, we are thrilled about the continued growth of our city,” Feigin said. “This resounding progress reinforces Milwaukee as an evolving and engaging place to visit, live, work and play.”

Representatives of FPC Live and sister company Frank Productions, which is majority-owned by Live Nation, didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Brooks told the Wisconsin Center District board that he is not making a call to action.

“As the CEO I have a responsibility in keeping the board apprised about business opportunities as well as business challenges,” he said. “I’m compelled to let you know that the Live Nation venues have the potential to adversely affect our existing and future businesses.”

Downtown Milwaukee Ald. Bob Bauman, who is a member of the center district board, challenged Brooks taking a position on the FPC Live proposal. Bauman acknowledged that the Bucks obtained the former Bradley Center site through the arena-funding legislation but pointed out that FPC Live is not seeking any financial subsidies from the city.

“In my mind we get into dangerous waters,” Bauman said. “The Wisconsin Center District is a taxpayer-funded entity, which in my mind puts it in a little bit of an odd position to object to a private enterprise, non-taxpayer-funded entity wanting to set up shop across the street and engage in competitive activity.”

Bauman said he wasn't taking a position on the merits of the proposed venue.

Brooks responded that he was simply exercising his responsibility to inform the district board of business issues.

“Competition is healthy,” Brooks said. “I'm not afraid of competition.”

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