

# GUEST OPINION: Time will tell what music center's impact will be

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By *TIM CLARK, guest columnist*

I have found the series of guest columns by Bruce Gould promoting the Brown County Music Center (BCMC) to be interesting but with a tendency to overstate the economic and cultural impacts of this venue. The last column also includes mischaracterizations regarding the history of this project.

In his May 15, 2019 column, "How you can help make the BCMC successful," Mr. Gould states "... the BCMC is a community project designed to be an asset for everyone." This is a disingenuous statement.

The stated aim for this project was to promote and support tourism and the tourism industry primarily in Nashville. In fact, it was stated at a June 2017 presentation at the Playhouse that when using the revenue from the innkeepers tax to finance a tourism-related project, the investment had to result in overnight stays, i.e., "heads in beds." This was not a true statement, and to my knowledge, was never retracted publicly. Revenue from the innkeepers tax can be used for any project that promotes tourism.

Mr. Gould, on behalf of the tourism industry, also stated that no other project other than this venue would be acceptable. This is a decision that he and his fellow tourism business owners did not have the power to make or enforce. Revenue from the innkeepers tax is a county asset that is included in a budget that has to be approved by the county council.

Local innkeepers, with the support of the county tourism industry, determined the type of investment, the size, cost, location and scope of the project. The county commissioners and council, who had to approve this project on behalf of county citizens, refused to hold public meetings to solicit citizen input on the desirability of this project or to consider and discuss other options. In fact, Mr. Gould and his team refused to support a community meeting involving commissioners, council and the Maple Leaf (BCMC) management group that was requested by the Brown County League of Women Voters.

It is also interesting that Mr. Gould warns us of the expected traffic congestion. This issue was raised at the zoning meeting where citizens questioned the wisdom and safety of locating the venue in the most congested part of the county. Citizens' concerns were ignored and we are now asked to embrace the congestion and any risks or adverse effects on our quality of life.

I was opposed to the process that was used to fast-track this project. The Brown County Redevelopment Commission (RDC), of which I was a member at the time, conducted a preliminary analysis on this project and developed a plan to conduct community meetings to

assess risks and gather input on the desirability and feasibility of this project. The commissioners and council declined the option to involve the RDC or to hold any official public meetings prior to their vote to approve this project.

Further, despite the conflict of interest among project sponsors, the council and commissioners refused to conduct an independent feasibility study. Such a study would have included identification of the target market for this venue, risks, and any issues with the name that was recently changed at the suggestion of a marketing firm.

Regarding the economic impact that Mr. Gould mentioned in a previous article, in 2017, the 6,983 county citizens who filed federal tax returns reported an adjusted gross income of \$385 million. In contrast, a 2017 economic impact study of tourism in Brown County conducted by Rockport Analytics identified \$42.7 million in tourism spending and just \$22.6 million total economic impact. Traveler spending supported 636 jobs, resulting in an average of \$19,259 in gross wages. Employment in Brown County as of November 2018 includes 2,687 jobs and there are 4,167 people who commute to jobs in other counties.

Tourism is a component of the county's economic system but not the major economic driver. The county is funded by income and property tax. Regarding property taxes, from 2011 to 2018, the adjusted net assessed valuations throughout the county increased from 7 to 16 percent — except for the tourist town of Nashville, where values declined by 1 percent. Commercial properties can be assessed differently than residential properties.

In summary, the Maple Leaf (BCMC) management group should focus on selling tickets and avoid mischaracterizing the history of the project. All of the major decisions (type, size, location, cost, scope) regarding this project were made by innkeepers with support of the tourism industry.

Time will tell if this project will have wide-scale community support. If this music venue is not financially sustainable, then the Maple Leaf management group should ensure that there is a backup plan that does not include requests for financial support by county taxpayers. Such a plan, if and when needed, may help mitigate the risk of protests and boycotts by county citizens that may not support a government bailout.

And finally, with the involvement of county citizens, develop a strategy for tourism that will identify the right balance of tourism within the county. This may help prevent conflicts regarding any future tourism-focused projects.

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