

“A nation may lose its liberties in a day, and not miss them for a century.”

— Baron de Montesquieu, 1689-1755

# THE WINDSOR STAR

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## OPINION

# Arena debate

## Protecting tax dollars

**W**indsor Mayor Eddie Francis is boldly predicting the city can leave more than 20 years of frustrating failure behind it and finally ensure long-suffering residents get the new arena they deserve.

It's a brave pledge, given this city's embarrassing history of false starts and missed opportunities, but Francis insisted this council could pull it off after emerging from an 8-hour strategic planning session recently. Councillor Alan Halberstadt one-upped him, calling for the shovel to be in the ground within 18 months.

The city has already committed \$15 million for the arena project and, before his state of the city address next week, Francis wants council to hammer out a proposed location, projected budget and list of wants and demands for potential developers.

Before council even begins to debate specifics like location, it must provide taxpayers with an ironclad guarantee they will be protected. Council must make it explicitly clear the city will not pay one penny more than the money already set aside. In fact, the city should strive to spend even less.

Arenas can be profitable ventures and there's every reason to believe a new arena in Windsor, if built and managed prudently, would turn a regular profit. The city shouldn't shy away from entering into a private-sector partnership but should do so only cautiously while guaranteeing taxpayers won't be left holding the bag for cost overruns or ongoing operational costs.

Francis is right to be optimistic in pursuit of the long-elusive arena because recent developments allow council to blaze a new path, free from the constraints of the past. Successive councils have long held fast to building an arena on the City Centre West lands adjacent to the Art Gallery, believing it would create a bookend to Casino Windsor to lure shoppers east and west along downtown arteries.

But the \$400-million expansion of Casino Windsor means council can now look at more practical locations for a new arena. The expansion will create a sprawling convention centre, a 23-storey hotel and a 5,000 seat auditorium on the eastern edge of downtown, eliminating the need for a multi-use entertainment facility on the core's western edge. An arena on the City Centre West lands wouldn't complement the Casino expansion. It would compete with it and likely lose the battle.

A top-notch arena at Windsor Raceway is starting to look far more attractive given the casino expansion. It would create another critical entertainment mass and tourist draw and would serve as the centrepiece of a rapidly growing residential and commercial area easily accessible to county and city residents alike.

Parking wouldn't be a problem and the site is easily accessible. There is also more room at Windsor Raceway, meaning additional ice pads could be built to complement the large centre pad and help address this region's chronic ice shortage woes.

The casino expansion means the city no longer needs a multi-use entertainment facility in the core. It needs a new home for the Spitfires and their loyal fans and it needs a top-notch facility dedicated to hockey and figure skating. This city doesn't need another Taj Mahalephant. It needs a new arena and it needed it yesterday.

Locating the arena at Windsor Raceway would also free the City Centre West lands for sorely needed development. An eclectic mix of residential and commercial units in the shade of the Art Gallery would generate the east-west foot traffic the city so desires, encouraging a rebirth of the downtown retail sector.