

Opinion: Convention center follies aren't unique to South Tahoe

By Jeff Jacoby, Townhall

Back in November of 1999, as Boston's 516,000-square-foot convention center was about to go up near the South Boston waterfront, I wrote a column about the futility of building exhibition halls with taxpayer money. Such facilities, I observed, are invariably touted as engines of economic growth, guaranteed to stimulate the creation of new jobs, the development of new hotels, and gushers of new spending by visiting conventioners. Then, when the promised boom fails to materialize, the subsidized facility is blamed for being too modest and taxpayers are told they must underwrite a venue even grander and more expensive.

"So here we go again," I predicted. "More construction, more rosy rhetoric – and more disappointment when the new convention center fails to meet its boosters' promises. . . . I give it about a decade. And then the droning will resume: If only we had a bigger convention center. . . ."

Ten years later to the month – how's that for prescient? – the Boston Globe reported on its front page that Massachusetts officials want to double the size of the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center, already the largest building of its kind in New England. The story noted that the convention center had never lived up to the exuberant promises made by its promoters. For example, a state-commissioned feasibility study had estimated that by 2009 the convention center would be doing enough business to generate 670,000 hotel room nights per year. In fact, the real figure turned out to be less than half, or about 313,000 room nights.

To a disinterested observer, it might seem obvious that Boston is no different from so many other cities competing for conventions and trade shows in a national market glutted with space. Over the past two decades, the amount of square footage available for exhibitions nationwide has soared nearly 75 percent, growing from 40.4 million square feet in 1990 to more than 70 million square feet today. Cities everywhere have been enlarging their convention centers. San Diego, Phoenix, Denver, Atlanta, Orlando, Chicago, Las Vegas, Philadelphia – all of them have either recently finished or are planning an expansion, all of them at taxpayer expense, and all of them justified with the same argument being made once again in Boston: If only we had more capacity, we could attract bigger shows, lure more visitors, stimulate more business, generate more growth.

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