

CHEERS FOR FEVERED ICE DREAMS

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Give Lawrence R. Gottesdiener a standing ovation for having faith in Hartford and thinking big.

He's the city's reigning No.1 fan, the developer of a half-billion dollars worth of downtown real estate, including the about-to-open Hartford 21 residential tower next to the Civic Center. He's also a self-described champion of lost causes. If anyone can bring a professional hockey team back to Hartford, he can.

Mr. Gottesdiener is not the only hockey knight to ride into town bearing the NHL banner. Howard Baldwin, who once owned the dear departed Whalers, also believes the region is ready for such a return. He's been working for five years to put a deal together.

It can't be a bad thing to have two wealthy and committed men vying for the same goal, even though they have different ideas about how to pursue a franchise. We think Mr. Gottesdiener's momentum and Mr. Baldwin's connections to the NHL would make for a potentially potent pursuit if they could find common ground.

Mr. Gottesdiener's enthusiasm for the task is gaining strength. He is serious about wanting to buy a NHL team and invest in a new arena. The Civic Center, in his estimation, would be too expensive to bring up to today's standards. That's a question the Connecticut Development Authority, which runs the Civic Center, is currently studying.

Meanwhile, the fact that few NHL teams are up for grabs does not daunt the developer. Neither does the prospect of selling investors on an admittedly risky deal. Neither do the legions of naysayers who insist the region can't lure a professional team. Let's hear it for optimism!

Mr. Gottesdiener and Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez recently visited St. Paul, Minn., a city that lost an NHL franchise at one time and now has a new team and a new arena. The developer was fired up by the visit. The mayor was realistic without being a downer. He's right that there would have to be solid buy-in of state government and the corporate community before a new arena could be considered. And, like the Civic Center, it would have to accommodate more events than hockey to make the numbers work.

Fans shouldn't be a problem. The Whalers have been absent for nine years, and still the faithful carry the torch for their team.

However, those who wish to show their enthusiasm for a franchise need to do a better job of supporting the minor league Wolf Pack. The team is in the playoffs again this season and yet draws fewer spectators to the Civic Center than the contracted minimum.

What's up with that?