

Games cities play

Stadiums worth \$700 million were designed to host Cleveland's professional sports teams and foster economic development. Instead, the downtown is faltering, the U.S. Census revealed the city is America's poorest and old insults are resurfacing

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CLEVELAND -- Nobody believed in this city's downtown more than Jeffrey Alpern, a third-generation clothier.

For years, he sat on committees, lobbied other shopkeepers and did all he could to restore the luster to one of the rustiest cities in the Rust Belt.

Then, it happened. A decrepit public market in the Gateway District disappeared. In short order came Jacobs Field, a throwback baseball stadium, and the swank basketball venue, Gund Arena. A few blocks away, the glitzier Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and a football stadium for the Cleveland Browns were the exclamation point.

Alpern and the rest of this city figured their fortunes had changed. What happened next serves as a warning to any city that bets on professional sports as a catalyst for urban redevelopment and neighborhood revitalization.

Today, the main streets in and around the Gateway are marked by empty office towers, vacant department stores and storefronts with "For Lease" signs. After spending \$700 million to build the nation's most extensive sports infrastructure, this city finds itself in a familiar place: trying to fix a downtown abandoned by businesses and the middle class, with neighborhoods gripped by despair.

This fall, the city of 425,000, won a distinction many here didn't think possible a few years ago: It was named America's poorest city by the U.S. Census.

And Alpern? He moved his Gold Fish Uniform store from the Gateway District, two miles east to the fringe of downtown. The building boom displaced blue-collar families that shopped downtown. In their place came sports fans who pay \$10 to park and go home after the game, he said.

"People were sold a bill of goods," he said in a recent interview in a showroom filled with work boots, parkas and blue security-guard uniforms. "What it did was implode the area around the arena. The concept was, 'Let's change downtown Cleveland to make it more comfortable for white suburbanites,' and they ruined it."

Newark officials frequently say they want to duplicate Cleveland's success story by building a \$310 million arena for the New Jersey Devils hockey team.

They argue with evangelic fervor that the downtown arena will spur jobs and first-class places to live, a hotel and parkland along the Passaic River. Newark, second to Cleveland in the poverty

survey, will throw off its past and embrace a future filled with promise, they say. The point is to make Newark into a destination.

The city has "moved to create the biggest economic and social engine in its history," Newark Mayor Sharpe James, the arena's biggest cheerleader, said last month as the City Council agreed to spend \$200 million on the project. The Devils' ownership will fund the rest.

A committee of civic leaders created by James to assess the proposal projected the arena will generate \$12 million in annual taxes, \$291 million in increased economic activity and 1,000 jobs when the first phase of building is complete.

For all that, Cuyahoga County Commissioner Roy Peter Jones, an original supporter of Cleveland's sports bonanza, offered this warning.

"There is no doubt that Gateway has not delivered the renaissance promised. It was probably overstated to begin with. The area in the immediate vicinity of the project has been substantially upgraded, but it certainly hasn't been the savior of downtown."

Jones' conclusion isn't all that surprising. A series of academic studies has found sports stadiums don't deliver on their promise of jobs and economic activity. An Indiana University report, for example, concluded Cleveland's \$300 million public investment in Jacobs Field and Gund Arena development generated roughly 2,000 full- and part-time jobs.

These days, Cleveland officials point with pride to four square blocks north of Jacobs Field and Gund Arena, to the eateries and bars sprouting up in the Warehouse District, an emerging community of 2,000 loft apartments. Long lines of young people form Friday and Saturday night outside dance clubs with names like Spy and Funky Buddha.

Nancy McCann, a vice president at Forest City Ratner, a development company that owns Tower City, a historic office tower renovated with \$7 million in taxpayer subsidies, said Cleveland's problems can't be pinned on the building boom.

"There's a lot of factors that contributed to the situation," she said. "Without critical mass -- people, shopping and restaurants -- and good schools, it's not going to happen."

Center of transportation Cleveland has always been a hardscrabble kind of place.

Founded by Gen. Moses Cleaveland in 1796 as an outpost known as "New Connecticut," the city used its location along busy Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River to evolve into a center for transportation, steel and oil.

By 1920, Cleveland's population of 797,000 made it the fifth-largest city in the United States. During the following decades, the city would leave its imprint on America in a variety of ways. The sprinter Jesse Owens hailed from Cleveland, as did the creators of Superman, and Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of a major city. During the 1950s, local disc jockey Alan Freed coined the term "rock'n' roll."

In some ways, Cleveland was no different than other industrial cities in the Midwest and Northeast, such as Pittsburgh and Detroit, which endured the demise of smokestack industries and the flight of residents to the suburbs during the 1960s.

Cleveland just seemed to suffer more than most.

When the polluted Cuyahoga River caught on fire in 1969, it became a national joke. When Cleveland's finances sank so far into red ink that the city defaulted in 1978, the "Mistake by the Lake" became ingrained in the nation's consciousness.

So, it was no surprise that Cleveland voters approved a \$300 million "sin tax" on alcohol and tobacco purchases in 1990 to help finance Gund Arena, home of the NBA's Cavaliers, and the Indians' Jacobs Field. They opened for business four years later and became national sensations.

The Indians, once one of baseball's most moribund franchises, sold every ticket for 455 consecutive home games, a league record. At Gund Arena, the Cavaliers also packed in the crowds during three consecutive trips to the NBA playoffs, drawing 1 million fans a year.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which opened in 1995, added a different kind of cachet to the city, helping to offset the psychological loss of the Browns to Baltimore in 1996.

"The question is, where would we be had we not built them? Are we better off? Sure, we're much better off," said Councilman Zach Reed, a candidate for mayor who represents a predominantly black neighborhood near downtown wrecked by drug abuse and poverty.

"The problem we had was that outsiders got the high-end construction jobs. But once it was built, we got the low-end jobs, the concessions and service jobs," Reed said during a break in a poverty summit last month for 100 homeless people, advocates for the poor and elderly caregivers.

'They all left' Cleveland was the toast of American cities when the calendar flipped in January 2000.

But soon the economy tumbled toward recession and Ohio bore the brunt. The state's economy lost 263,507 jobs during the past four years, just more than a third of the 710,000 jobs lost nationwide during that period.

"People just started disappearing and went to the suburbs," said Frank Gibson, 71, a gray-haired retired factory worker, who has rented an apartment in downtown Cleveland since 1973. "The businesses went and the people went with them. Small businesses, big businesses, they all left."

The result is a downtown office vacancy rate of 20 percent, seven percentage points higher than at the start of the 2001 recession.

Jobs and families headed to the eastern fringes of Cuyahoga County, to fast-growing communities such as Solon, Westlake and Beechwood, where there are expensive shopping malls and housing developments with names like Crocker Park and Legacy Village.

A staggering 31.3 percent of Clevelanders last year lived in poverty, according to the U.S. Census -- ahead of Newark, Detroit, Fresno, Calif., Miami and El Paso, Texas.

Cleveland's median household income, \$22,978 yearly, ranks last in the nation among major cities, and unemployment hovers at 17 percent.

Vacant buildings are the byproduct of a shrinking tax base that has thrown Cleveland into a budget crisis. This year, the city fired more than 300 police officers and firefighters, and hundreds of teachers and other school workers. Voters this month rejected a proposed \$68 million tax increase to restore some of the school cuts.

"We know that people need to work," said Celeste Glasgow Ribbins, a spokeswoman for first-term Cleveland Mayor Jane Campbell, who faces re-election next year. "We need to bring jobs to the city that pay a living wage."

A symbol of the city's job loss is the 45-story glass and steel tower built in 1985 as headquarters for Standard Oil of Ohio. The company was later acquired by British Petroleum and the

headquarters eventually moved to Chicago, leaving the BP Tower near the center of downtown Cleveland mostly empty.

Even the Flats, a celebrated entertainment district along the Cuyahoga River, has become a ghost town. Assaults and gunplay in recent years have scared away office workers and sports fans leaving the Gateway and Browns Stadium four blocks away. The exodus has left a few dance clubs and go-go bars amid an array of shuttered former tourist haunts. A stroll through the empty parking lots means, in some places, stepping over discarded heroin needles.

"People come down for a game and look at what we're looking at and say, 'Why do I want to go there?'" said Gibson, the downtown apartment dweller, motioning toward a group of panhandlers milling outside a 24-hour convenient store. "Every 10 years, it's like a generation of people say, 'Forget it' and just leave."

Seeking a savior On a Saturday afternoon game last month, budding superstar LeBron James lit up the Washington Wizards for 24 points, and the Cavaliers won 105-74. As the game clock ran out, fans poured from Gund Arena across a public plaza and headed directly into a parking structure. Some strolled through enclosed, heated walkways.

A block from the arena, only a handful of the crowd streaming toward parking lots stopped two blocks from the East 4th Street entrances at four mostly empty sports bars, doors open wide and jukeboxes blaring.

Within a half hour after the game ended, it was as though it never happened. The streets of Gateway were mostly empty.

It wasn't all that different during the summer. Attendance at Jacobs Field fell for the fifth year in a row -- it's down 48 percent from its 1999 peak.

Now, some leaders are looking at a different kind of economic savior.

People as politically diverse as mainstream Democratic Cuyahoga Commissioner Jones and neighborhood activists like Councilman Reed have publicly called for opening up downtown to casino gambling.

The idea, still in the planning stages, is to lure a casino company willing to build a hotel and subsidize a convention center, Jones said. The Cleveland casino would compete for gamblers who make the four-hour trek to Detroit and Windsor, Canada.

The economic boost from the hotel and meeting center, Jones said, would far outweigh any social ills and negative impact on existing businesses from casino gambling.

"At this juncture, we should not be over-paternalistic," he said. "We have to believe the vast, vast majority of people are not going to go gamble when they have to pay the rent and put food on the table."

"Cleveland was a comeback city in the '80s and has to mount another comeback," he said, "and hopefully, each time with new ideas, that will make us an all-star."

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