

Bucks want a new arena? Let them build it

April 30, 2013

Many of us have high-definition visual memory of the day the Bradley Center opened, as it was less than 25 years ago, in the fall of 1988. It was the first indoor sports facility in Wisconsin to include luxury boxes, the latest amenity for the wealthy and for corporate clients.

Apparently, 25 is the new 75 by sports-facility standards, because there's talk of what is now the BMO Harris Bradley Center needing to be replaced. The talk is coming from the Milwaukee Bucks and David Stern, commissioner of the National Basketball Association.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported April 19 that, when asked whether the NBA had imposed a hard deadline of 2017 — the year the Bucks' current lease expires — to have a new arena in place in Milwaukee, Stern said: "The Bucks came to us and said we will have a plan that will have a new arena at the end of this extension of this lease. 'And will you please give us an extension and approve it?' And we did. That's the current state of the record."

Unless Stern was elected to the Wisconsin Supreme Court when we weren't looking — and we do keep an eye on Supreme Court elections — we're certain that the only people upon whom Stern can impose a hard deadline are NBA owners or NBA employees. Taxpayers in Milwaukee and Wisconsin shouldn't blink at any upcoming threats to move the team.

It's extortion, conducted by pro sports teams and leagues upon the cities in which teams currently reside: Build us a new place to play or we will take the team someplace that will.

The NBA is conducting such an operation right now, entertaining an offer from Seattle to take the Kings off Sacramento's hands because Sacramento balked at building a new arena. (An NBA committee voted against the move on Monday.) The possible loss of the team led Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, a former NBA player, to pledge \$255 million in city taxpayer money to induce the Kings to stay. Seattle has been without a team since 2008, when the SuperSonics moved to Oklahoma City ... because Seattle would not build a new arena.

It's quite the merry-go-round, and the City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County and any other county that might get roped into a Basketball Arena District should feel free to get off and try a different carnival attraction.

When this build-new-or-we-move threat comes to town, or to a state capital, the oft-repeated line is the positive economic impact of the big-league team on the city and surrounding communities, specifically that it attracts visitors with money to spend from beyond the surrounding area, and that this money would be lost were a team allowed to move.

Sounds plausible, this line of thinking, but it's not supported by facts.

Andrew Zimbalist, a sports economist at Smith College, said in 2009 that "one should not anticipate that a team or a facility by itself will either increase employment or raise per capita income in a metropolitan area."

Studies by Zimbalist, the Cato Institute and Dennis Coates, also a sports economist, have shown that most stadium and arena spending comes from local metropolitan residents.

"Instead of spending their entertainment dollars at local restaurants and nights out dancing, they are spending at the ballpark or the arena," a report by the Milwaukee Legislative Reference Bureau released April 5 cites Zimbalist as saying. "Their overall entertainment spending is constant."

Coates' study, released in 2003, reports that "economists have found no evidence of positive economic impact of professional sports teams and facilities on urban economies."

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett has said in recent weeks that, while he wants the Bucks to stay, a regional solution needs to be found to decide whether a new arena is warranted, the Journal Sentinel reported.

We'll pass on regional solutions, Mr. Mayor. Many of us in Racine County are still waiting for the positive economic impact of the 0.1 percent sales tax we've been paying for Miller Park since before it opened in 2001.

We'd like the Bucks to stay; it's nice to be able to see NBA action without having to drive all the way to Chicago. But our interest in keeping the Bucks is not so great that it warrants the spending of any public money on a new facility.

If the Bucks want a new arena, they should feel free to build it themselves. If that's not good enough, Seattle is still willing to play this game.