



Hoffman pins Sears Centre turnaround on concert promotion

By Ashok Selvam

The Sears Centre hosted only eight concerts last year - far below the 20 shows a 2005 feasibility study for the arena suggested was needed.

For a building struggling to pay off a \$50 million loan, that's not exactly music to anyone's ears.

Hoffman Estates officials hope hiring a private management firm with national ties will draw more concerts once the village assumes control of the 11,000-seat arena, near Route 59 and the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway.

The village announced Monday it's in talks to take over the 3-year-old arena from primary owner Ryan Cos.

Music is even more important without a major anchor sports team similar to what the United Center has in the Chicago Bulls and Blackhawks.

Minor-league franchises have come and gone at the Sears Centre and, though the Chicago Slaughter indoor football team just won its league title and the Lingerie Football League's Chicago Bliss starts play this year, officials aren't counting on them alone to turn things around.

An audit document obtained by the Daily Herald reveals the three firms interested in running the Sears Centre. The first, AEG Live, is a promoter that manages day-to-day venue operations and also handles booking. AEG's assets include the Staples Center in Los Angeles, where the company is based and where the Michael Jackson memorial service took place Tuesday.

AEG has signed many musicians away from their record labels to take control of their concert tours, said Glenn Wilson, who teaches music business at the University of Illinois. That gives AEG the power to steer artists toward venues it controls.

While that could keep artists represented by other firms away from the arena, it does provide a steady number of acts.

"I think it would help (the Sears Centre) book more concerts," Wilson said.

The other two firms eyeing the arena are ones that strictly manage and operate venues. Pennsylvania-based SMG has operated Soldier Field for the Chicago Park District for many years. Global Spectrum is a division of cable giant Comcast Corp., which owns Philadelphia's 76ers and Flyers.

The two firms both have advantages, as Global can use cable TV to promote events, and SMG controls several venues worldwide, said Martin Thorson, managing director for sports, entertainment and conventions for LRA Worldwide, a Pennsylvania consulting group.

Global Spectrum and SMG need to work with a promoter like Jam Productions to attract performers. Jam had plans, now stalled, to build the Prairie Creek Amphitheater outdoor music venue next to the Sears Centre. Its president, Jerry Mikelson, said he prefers to work with them but not AEG, a competitor in the field.

"Most event promoters prefer to work with a national arena management company rather than a competitor, so if the Sears Centre wants to maximize its utilization, then it should choose a venue management company who is 'Switzerland' to those of us who compete against each other every day of the year," he said via e-mail.

But Gary Bongiovani, editor of concert trade magazine Pollstar, said AEG would work with Jam or other promoters under the right circumstances.

"They're not going to turn away the circus or anyone else who wants to put on a concert," he said.

All the experts agree the Sears Centre will be in a better position after hiring a firm with national ties. Thorson said all it takes is a look at Pollstar's top 50 venues, only a few of which have independent management firms.

Thorson, a former senior vice president at SMG, added that the Sears Centre would be best to focus on overall customer service, including parking, ushers and concessions. First impressions are crucial to ensure a returning customer, and Sears Centre patrons have complained of high parking fees.

"It's not just the act on stage," he said.