

Bowie City Council reverses ice arena decision

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JUL 02, 2019 AT 3:45 PM



Advocates for a new Bowie Ice Arena embrace after the city council approves a contract to build the new arena on July 1.

The Bowie City Council accepted a \$21.7 million bid Monday night from Costello Construction to build the new two-sheet Bowie Ice Arena, reversing a decision they made last month.

The council voted 5-2 to accept the bid Monday night. The motion, made by Councilman Jimmy Marcos, included a provision that city staff must present project idea for a new indoor courts facility that includes a specific location and cost to the council by its second meeting in October.

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Ice skaters and hockey players waited nearly four hours to hear that decision, and embraced one another after the vote was called.

As they did two weeks ago, the players and skaters filled the council chambers to ask the council to reverse its earlier decision not to accept the contract, saying the amenity has a profound impact on their lives and adds to the city's appeal. The new facility would replace the present ice arena, which opened in 1971.

People opposed to the location of the facility also spoke, saying the arena will put more cars on Church Road and add to concerns about traffic safety, citing the recent death of a teen who was hit while crossing the road.

Before the council voted on the contract, it reversed a decision to put a question about the facility on the ballot during the city's election this November.

In a memo to council, City Manager Al Lott said construction on the ice arena should begin this fall and be complete in the fourth quarter of 2020.

Lott wrote that the city is working with Hughes Group Architects and Hill International to design a 77,500 square-foot arena with concessions and seating, two community rooms, a rink with seating capacity for 700 and a rink with seating capacity for 100, 12 locker rooms and 250 parking spots.

Skaters and hockey players said they were blindsided last month when the council voted four to two against accepting the contract, halting the project after years of planning and more than \$3 million spent by the city.

Councilmembers Henri Gardner and Isaac Trouth voted against the contract on June 3, but for it July 1. Darian Senn-Carter was absent June 3 but voted in favor of the contract Monday night. Marcos and Mayor Fred Robinson voted to accept the contract both times, and members Michael Estéve and Dufour Woolfley voted to reject it both times.

In its fiscal 2020 budget the city included a plan to sell \$25 million in bonds to pay for the new ice arena.

Woolfley's top concern was the cost of the project which he thinks will lead to a tax increase next year. He said he doesn't think the city's residents are really interested in paying for a "regional facility" with a number of non-resident users. He said after the initial contract vote failed the ballot question, which he proposed, would have given the ice community the chance to prove the broader community wanted the rink.

"The irony is, people were suggesting it shouldn't go to referendum because it would fail, which is by definition the reason not to pursue the project at all," Woolfley said. "If the majority of people don't want to have it."

He also says he wished the council took more time to consider a private-public partnership to repair and manage the old rink instead of replacing it.

Robinson said while it is always reasonable to consider a tax increase, he said he doesn't think the city will need to do so next year, based on his review of projected figures. Robinson said past generations have built amenities, including the old ice rink, that together make Bowie a popular place to live — a play house in the woods, a senior center, a skate park, and more.

"Every generation has added something," Robinson said. "That's a reasonable thing for solid cities who want to stay strong."