

Astrodome Supporters Focus Group

September 20, 2014

Meeting Summary

A meeting of Houston citizens in support of sensitive reuse of the Astrodome met Saturday, September 20th from 11:30a to 2p at Theo's restaurant, 812 Westheimer. The meeting allowed for focused discussion for the purpose of gathering information which is intended to assist in fine-tuning proposals for use of the Astrodome within the framework of the indoor park concept. The results of this meeting will be emailed to all participants, and shared with Harris County government officials and members of the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation.

Mike Vance of hosting organization Houston Arts and Media welcomed the 40 meeting participants and introduced Ryan Walsh from Harris County Judge Emmett's office who spoke about the judge's vision of an Astrodome indoor park. He was followed by Stephanie Jones who elaborated on some other immediate fact-gathering plans. Edgardo Colon, chairman of the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation, explained his agency's role and progress in the quest to reinvigorate the Astrodome.

Next, Mike Acosta unveiled his scale model of the Astrodome to inspire discussion and provide a visual starting point. Acosta's model, inspired after Roy Hofheinz's model that sold the original concept of the Domed Stadium, included multiple floor configurations including space for a rodeo horse arena and food court. The horse arena would benefit from better loading facilities and arena height than the existing facility. It included an OTC configuration and a Texans game day experience that provided a climate-controlled broadcast area, a kids zone and a football field where game ticket holders could toss a football and expand their tailgate experience. It also included climate-controlled skywalks that connect to NRG Center. Also there was a Hofheinz Plaza on the south side of the building complete with a statue honoring the man whose vision created Houston's most important structure.

Participants were led through a facilitated idea-generating exercise, then small group refinement of ideas, and finally presentation of top ideas for potential future use of the Astrodome to the group as a whole. Potential activity and use functions were written on boards placed at the front of the room. Each table's top ideas were noted, and attendees used dots to vote on their preferred use opportunity. Each idea used three guiding principles as a framework to work within – that the opportunities: have a primarily public function, be structurally viable, and retain the identity and integrity associated with the structure of the Dome.

While generating the top ideas through the facilitated process, several general supporting opportunities were identified:

- There should be free access & free parking except when the lease agreement prohibits it
- That the structure should have cooling/water features
- Get new Houstonians into the story, and to enjoy it with us
- Allow food trucks and other related vendors

- Consider solar arrays and other engineering opportunities
- Offer motorized guided tours of the Astrodome itself
- The structure should reflect the visionary city of Houston

Facilitated Voting

In the final voting process, the highest number of votes, 17, were cast for a museum space, which could incorporate a Houston Hall of Fame and STEM/education. Other potential topics include space exploration, oil and gas, baseball and previous Dome events.

The next most-popular use identified is festival space, which received 15 votes. Participants named festivals revolving around themes such as music, beer, society, and the return of the Pin Oak horse show.

Almost as popular as festival space is the idea for use as a seasonal indoor park which received 13 votes. Popular ideas include ice skating, rock climbing, tubing/floating, running track, biking, tennis and golf/putting green.

A performance venue received 12 votes, and amphitheater and wrestling opportunities were noted along with tensile panels to improve acoustics and utilize only a portion of the floor.

Both greenspace/landscape and Adventure Zone garnered 8 votes. Ideas for a greenspace include a focus on something unique to Houston, possibly with a tropical theme (The name Astrodome Paradise Park was suggested by one table.) and partnerships with Houston Arboretum and Nature Center and other local organizations.

The Astrodome Adventure Zone concept, which had much crossover with the seasonal park concept, could have the opportunity for a rotating ride that would change, along with a Zipline, a rock climbing facility located on level 7 of the Dome and above to provide a unique experience that would be an attraction, and an indoor mountain biking track that would move from the top level of the Dome down toward the bottom. Features could be indoor/outdoor.

Ideas that both received 5 votes each include an amusement park with a signature ride with an aerial view, and convention space that could house the Houston ComiCon, boat and auto show, and have room for exhibits, a history of local sporting events, and leasable office space. The convention space idea would work in tandem with the NRG Center.

Questionnaire

Additionally, 34 participants completed a questionnaire that was distributed at the meeting. Meeting attendees identified themselves as community members, historians, architects, sales and marketing professionals, educators, writers, real estate and media professionals, retired military and interior designers.

Of those responding, 86 percent indicated that it is imperative to have a public usage element to future development, 11 percent felt that it is important that it should, and 3 percent of respondents were neutral.

When asked how important cost free public access is to the Dome, 26 percent noted that it's imperative with 32 percent feeling strongly that it should. 21 percent were neutral on the topic, 15 percent indicated that it might not be important and 6 percent noted that cost free public access is not at all important.

When asked how important national public perception is of the treatment of the Astrodome to Houston's image, 85 percent of the participants indicated that it is imperative, 9 percent believed that it is important and 6 percent were neutral about the statement. Of note, one participant had concerns with the word repurposing, noting that they took this word to mean rehabilitation without significantly altering the structure and voted using that meaning.

The majority of respondents, at 66 percent, indicated that they do not see the Dome being hollowed out for a parking garage as an appropriate solution. 14 percent noted that they could, and 20 percent noted that they would consider that option only as the last resort.

The majority of participants, at 53 percent, noted that they would not be satisfied with retaining only part of the steel skeleton included in a park area. 31 percent noted that they would be, while 22 percent noted that this would be an option only as a last resort.

In the questionnaire, participants were asked to list top free activities that could potentially be part of the Astrodome. Many responded with generalities, such as the space should be kid-friendly, have a base in "STEM and youth education", "a family-focus" to the events and activities, and that generally amusement and leisure activities should be prevalent.

Additionally, free parking and water features were recommended. One participant noted that fireworks should be part of the experience. Generally, exercise and fitness opportunities were most noted, including areas for:

- Golf
- Tennis (USTA)
- Swimming
- Zipline
- Labyrinth
- Park/playground
- Soccer
- Running
- Walking
- Biking
- Yoga
- Sitting

Additional opportunities identified include:

- Movies
- Farmers market
- Water park and recreation
- Picnic venues, dog only areas
- Rodeo events
- Texans events, including tailgating
- Amusement park
- Performance venue (music, theater)
- Event space for nonprofits
- Festivals
- Exhibit and meeting venues
- Museum

Also in the questionnaire, attendees noted potential revenue-producing opportunities.

A popular idea was an adventure park with rides, named Astrodome Adventure Zone.

Additional opportunities noted include:

- Rodeo
- Carnival
- Festivals
- Convention and meeting space
- Performance venue, including music
- Recreation rental
- Museums
- Event space rental for galas and society functions
- Special and community events
- Swimming pool
- High school title games
- Rock climbing
- Ice rink
- Sports
- Golf/putting
- Fun runs
- Ski slopes
- Farmers market
- Widescreen movies
- Art shows
- Shops
- Restaurants
- Food trucks

One participant noted that the Astrodome should be a gateway to all activities in the complex. Another noted that the Astrodome and NRG Stadium were like brother and sister and should work in tandem to make a stronger NRG complex that would be an attraction for Harris County residents and out of town visitors alike.

Essay Questions from the Questionnaire

Participants also answered two long form questions: “What would be your ideal use for the Dome?” and “What is your personal history with the Astrodome?” A summary of those responses follows here.

“What would be your ideal use for the Dome?”

Most of these are reflected in the above data from either the facilitated voting process or the questionnaire fill-in-the-blank questions. However some additional comments add elaboration. They are listed here in no particular order:

“A multi-purpose convention/arena space to complement Reliant would make the most sense.”

“A destination for citizens of Harris County as well as visitors from around the world.”

“Multi-faceted public use venue that preserves the original engineering marvel.”

“Discovery Green South”

“Strongly support any use that allows frequent free access by public.”

“Do not want to see this as another park or greenspace. Land & history is too valuable to relegate it to picnic tables and swings.”

“Income producing movie sets – lots of revenue & features once in a while. Houston on film should be considered.”

“My ideal use for the Dome would be its inclusion in sports activities. High School championship title games most highly exposing the young to this history making facility.”

“Public space for ALL citizens to use.”

“Keep the high open volume visible & apparent”

“Education & recreational”

“Rodeo should move their carnival into the Dome to provide additional revenue and open additional parking.”

“Using Mike Acosta’s basic design to be structurally viable & retain identity.”

“The ‘for the public free concept’ is very good.”

“The Dome belongs to the people of Harris County. As such it should remain a community resource. The Astrodome should be made available to the myriad different groups in the region who host annual festivals. These festivals normally occur outdoors in less than favorable weather. The Dome offers a large amount of conditioned space which is ideal for ‘outdoor’ festivals.”

“What is your personal history with the Astrodome?”

The large majority of respondents listed a long history with the Astrodome. Some reflected a close personal relationship. One was the daughter of Roy Hofheinz who conceived the building. One was on the original design team. One worked for Judge Hofheinz. One was the son of an original radio broadcaster, another the grandchild of an early groundskeeper.

Several mentioned that they watched it being built. Many recalled attending baseball and football games, the rodeo and the circus, concerts, demolition derbies and motocross. Six people noted that they were season ticket holders for the Astros or Oilers. One said he had “an Astrodome tattoo on my leg.” Another said they “Assisted with Katrina relief efforts there.”

Not everyone had such a personal history, however. Two said that they had never been inside the building, though one noted they had “known about it since childhood.” Two specifically said they grew up in Louisiana and made trips to see the Dome and Astroworld. Another wrote that “Like many, it was the reason for my first visit to Houston.”

Additional Comments from the Questionnaire

These are additional comments that were submitted on other pieces of paper:

“Focus not on just another museum or park. It must be an attraction!”

“Unique approaches - not just something competitive. E.g. rock climbing at the 7th level is something you can't find anywhere else. Same with bike ride to/from top of the Dome.”

“Filter out well-intentioned but emotional reasons. Concentrate on substance that makes people want it.”

“Free parking outside of Texans & rodeo is important.”

“Food trucks are important because it does not require investment by any single food vendor and offers affordable variety and flexibility. DO NOT use a concession vendor – too costly for bad food & drink.”

“Interior must be flexible and accommodate a variety of uses.”

“Connect the running and biking trail to the network along the bayous.”

“Train connected from Metro to Dome to Kirby.”

Finally, this drawing was turned in along with handing in notes. It shows indoor/outdoor features of gardens and zipline.

