

[CVB Plans Facility Upgrades](#) By Jonathan Van Dyke

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The demands and expectations of a convention center and arena complex have been and are changing, officials say, and current and future projects are trying to keep the space viable and at a competitive advantage — which includes plans for a possible large-scale upgrade to the arena.

Some changes will be subtle and smaller, said Steve Goodling, Convention & Visitors Bureau president and CEO. Just this week, workers have been installing new furniture spaces and palm trees into the lobby area of the Long Beach Convention Center.

“The idea is to create functioning space so that when people come out of their sessions, there is space to congregate, to meet and to share ideas,” he said. “Which is why you come to conventions.”

Workers also have been upgrading the bathrooms in the convention center, bolstering what was formerly unappealing or at least boring, into much fancier and hotel-competitive accommodations, he added.

Still, the biggest possibilities for an upgrade lie ahead. Goodling has been pitching a \$4.5 million to \$6 million upgrade of the Long Beach Arena.

“It’s a concept that we’ve talked with the city about and we’ve talked with council members about,” he said. “Generally speaking, everyone is excited about the possibility of having additional utilization of the arena.”

The main part of the upgrade would be a complex tress (think a maze of metal suspended on the ceiling) and curtain system that Goodling said could transform the arena in several different ways.

First of all, the curtain coming down can block off and hide major sections (second and third level of seating) of the arena seating, creating a more intimate ballroom space for about 5,000 people. Half, two-thirds or all of that space can be used in different curtain configurations. The tress system will come with, and allows for, many different lighting and visualization looks (the high end \$6 million would include massive video screens).

Right now, the convention center setup has a ballroom that can host about 1,100 people, Goodling said, which is somewhat limiting.

“The idea is to block out the visualization of the seats so that when you walk in you don’t feel like you’re in an arena, but you feel like you are in a specialized venue,” he said of the arena upgrade. “For us, (the old ballroom) is limiting because many groups need a larger space.”

Goodling estimated that a minimum of 600 more groups could be solicited due to the arena upgrade that would have a ballroom component. He said that a study — conducted by Lisa Grobar, a California State University, Long Beach economics professor — showed there could be an economic impact from an arena upgrade of about \$11 million each year and 125 jobs (assuming it would net seven additional conventions).

“It’s substantially cheaper than building something and in today’s environment, a loft-style ballroom would resonate,” he said. “It would be a competitive advantage, and by the same token, it will help us bring additional business to the city.”

Ultimately, the decision will rest with the City Council. Goodling said that money for the upgrade is being looked at through the Tidelands Funds — one-time oil revenue from the Port of Long Beach.

“We’ve gotten a glimpse of this, as far as the possibilities,” Vice Mayor and Second District Councilwoman Suja Lowenthal said. “The suggested upgrades would make it much more marketable and profitable.”

Lowenthal said she and the council would be looking at a number of projects for the one-time use money — including operations as simple, but as important, as bathroom upgrades along the beach.

“This (upgrade to the arena) could take us to where we are today to a new level of competitiveness among (Convention & Visitors Bureaus) around the region,” she said.

She also said that beyond an influx of money from Tidelands that it might also be prudent to look at private and commercial partnerships for an upgrade.

No decisions on Tidelands Funds have been made, but the City Council is tentatively scheduled to look at the subject during its Oct. 4 meeting.

“What I can tell you is that this upgrade would open up an entirely new universe,” Goodling said.