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OFFICIALS BREAK GROUND FOR ARENA

Milestone for Wichita



City and county officials participate in a groundbreaking ceremony Tuesday for the new downtown arena. Work on the \$205.5 million project started last month, but Tuesday was the day that Sedgwick County leaders selected to pose for pictures.

Travis Heying/The Wichita Eagle

Ceremony officially kicks off \$205.5 million arena construction



The new arena is being paid for with a 1 percent, countywide sales tax that is scheduled to end Dec. 31. Courtesy illustration

BY JERRY SIEBENMARK
The Wichita Eagle

In 10 years as president of the Greater Wichita Area Sports Commission, Bob Hanson said he has attended 1,200 meetings and events related to a downtown arena.

Make that 1,201.

On Tuesday, Hanson was among 250 people who attended a groundbreaking ceremony for the downtown arena.

Though work on the \$205.5 million arena actually started last month, Tuesday was the

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See more photos from the groundbreaking and look at illustrations of the arena via galleries attached to this story at Kansas.com.

day that Sedgwick County leaders selected to pose for pictures. They used shovels to turn a pile of dirt neatly placed atop a fresh concrete slab to mark the start of the project.

"So many people worked so long for it," Hanson said Tuesday morning from the Atlanta airport, where he was waiting to catch a plane to Wichita to make it back in time for

the ceremony. "I call it . . . a significant milestone for the Wichita community."

But it will be some time before that milestone begins to take shape.

Ron Holt, assistant county manager who is leading the arena project, said that over the next three months workers will ram massive steel and iron pilings into the ground for the foundation of the arena, which will seat 15,000 for basketball.

"It'll be next summer before we see stuff start coming up from the ground," Holt said.

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Directing those workers will be officials from a joint venture between Dondlinger & Sons Construction Co. of Wichita and Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Hunt Construction Co.

Holt said the joint venture enables Dondlinger, which had the successful bid on the arena project, to take part and at the same time not exceed its bonding capacity for the project.

Hunt has experience building large sports and entertainment venues such as the arena for the NBA's Charlotte (N.C.) Bobcats and the new Busch Stadium in St. Louis.

Besides its work on Koch Arena at Wichita State University, Dondlinger has its imprint all over downtown Wichita. It built Exploration Place, Epic Center and Century II Expo Hall.

Dondlinger president Tom Dondlinger said the arena project is a rewarding and fulfilling project for his workers, "something they're going to remember for years to come."

"That's what this project means," he said.

An opening date for the arena has not been set, Holt said. Construction is scheduled to be completed by mid-January 2010, he said.

"Certainly being the eternal optimist that I am, we'll be able to beat that," Holt said.

One thing that won't last much longer is the 1-percent countywide sales tax that will pay for the arena. The county began collecting it in July 2005 and it will end Dec. 31.

Holt said the county has collected \$184 million in sales tax through September, and he expects to collect all \$205.5 million when the final county tax receipts are

received.

Sedgwick County voters approved the sales tax increase in November 2004. Getting voters to approve the increase was a campaign that Hanson and the Sports Commission took on.

That effort followed several years of feasibility studies for a downtown arena and discussions about when to bring the issue of paying for an arena to a public vote.

"We finally got enough horses together working on the same page," Hanson said.

The construction shouldn't cause any additional road closings. In addition to the current project on Waterman, workers

will add turn lanes on Washington from English to Kellogg "sometime in the next year," Holt said.

"I think that will take traffic down to one lane both ways, but I don't think it will close it," he said.

Downtown real estate brokers such as Marlin Penner said construction in and around the arena — and on other downtown projects such as WaterWalk — serves to draw more interest from retailers and other businesses looking to relocate.

"Everybody wants to ride a bus they see moving," said Penner, president of NAI John

T. Arnold Associates. "The last several years we've gone from being a downtown that's been somewhat parked and, now, we are moving."

Reach Jerry Siebenmark at 316-268-6576 or jsiebenmark@wichitaeagle.com.