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Save the Hynes

RECENT CALLS for the closing of the Hynes Convention Center rest on the highly questionable assumption that prospects for the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center will improve without the competition from the Hynes. Whatever ails the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center will not be cured by the sale of the Hynes, which is the lifeblood of one of Boston's most vital areas.

Back Bay serves as an important economic engine for the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is a destination that draws people from other areas of the city and attracts tourists and visitors. The Hynes Convention Center is an essential component of Back Bay that fuels its vitality and contributes to the economic stability of its hotels, retail stores, restaurants, tourist attractions, and service businesses.

Events at the Hynes in 1999 brought \$348 million to the regional economy, according to a study done last year for the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority (by City Square Associates). That translates into jobs for residents of Boston and financial health for the businesses operating in the Back Bay. The potential closing of the popular and successful Hynes would severely impact the area's ability to generate jobs, sales revenues, and tax dollars.

According to the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the top four employers of Boston residents are all located in the Back Bay. The service industry, so heavily represented in the Back Bay, employs approximately 25 percent of Boston residents. It is a mistake to cavalierly threaten to put the Hynes on the auction block in order to compensate for financial shortfalls predicted from the slow start-up of the Boston convention center and think that Back Bay and the City of Boston can absorb the blow without consequence.

The closing of the Hynes, or any change in its use, would result in a net dollar loss for the state and prove to be a solution that is penny wise and pound foolish.

Boston is in jeopardy of losing a lucrative portion of the convention market that will not be served by the new convention center. Many of the professional and trade association meetings are of a size that can be accommodated by the Hynes, and their meeting planners would prefer to capitalize on the conveniences and amenities of the Back Bay. The City Square study found that the attraction of the Hynes is three-

fold: Conventioneers liked its design, size, and location. While some conventions may move from being "booked" at the Hynes to the BCEC, a large portion will not.

There has been a great deal of skittishness by convention planners to formally sign up for conventions at the BCEC until all the details of construction and hotel development are worked out. Instead of banking on the stability of the Hynes Convention Center, which continues to count on solid bookings even in a softer economy, the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority chose to inject a large dose of uncertainty about the fate of the Hynes by organizing a committee to explore its possible sale. This has compounded the overall insecurity planners have about holding a convention in Boston of any size.

The Boston Convention and Exhibition Center was proposed as a big sister for the Hynes, a facility that will allow Boston to capture the complete spectrum of meeting needs — large, medium-sized, and small conventions along with the gate shows at the Bayside Exposition and Conference Center. This vision was based on thoughtful, long-term planning. The visionaries who pushed the Commonwealth to invest in the ability to reap the benefits of the entire convention market have a longer than anticipated wait while the BCEC completes its ramp up period and the South Boston Waterfront, Back Bay, and the entire region yield the fruits of this labor. The final outcome will be worth the wait.

Another study initiated by the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau conducted by PriceWaterhouse Coopers suggested that "some of the initiatives that should be considered by the community to ensure the success" of the BCEC include efficient transportation between the center and hotel room supply (i.e., Back Bay) for convenient and rapid access. Instead of creating a committee to respond to political pressure regarding the Hynes, Massachusetts Convention Center Authority should focus on the more immediate problem of how conventioneers are going to get from *there* (the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center) to *here* (Back Bay).

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