

Arena being considered for sports, high school graduations

Montgomery to begin study in next few weeks

By Dena Levitz
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Montgomery County's Economic Development chief of staff confirmed Tuesday that her office is commissioning a feasibility study to determine if the county could afford to build a large multipurpose arena.

The somewhat hush-hush study — of which County Council members said they were not aware until Monday — is set to start in the next few weeks and be completed in late November, according to Tina Benjamin.

Mainly, the study grew from a need to find a sizable indoor high school graduation venue for county schools, which are getting more

populated by the year. But graduation events alone could not sustain a massive undertaking like an arena, hence the need for research, Benjamin said.

"The first step is to determine whether there is a need, who the potential users are, how many days a week it would be used, what revenue projections could be," she said. "The results could come back and say, 'We're way off base and don't have the market for this,' and the process could stop completely."

Right now Montgomery County's two largest similarly themed venues are the Strathmore Center in Bethesda and a conference center in White Flint, both of which have the capacity for a few thousand attendees. Strathmore, though, is centered on performing arts concerts and the conference center is suited for business events, which Benjamin characterized as "completely different kinds of facilities."

"What we're thinking is that the arena would be more for indoor sports, maybe ice shows," she said. "But we have to identify if the sport is lacrosse or what."

Also to be determined is where a possible arena would go if, in fact, the green light were given for the project.

The study is being handled by the Maryland Stadium Authority, which will contract with Towson State University. Benjamin said a dollar amount for the cost of the research should be reached in the next week.

As for the secretive nature of the study, she said leaders in the recreation department and intergovernmental affairs division had been brought up to speed and that she assumed the council knew about the endeavor.

"They can be involved to the extent that they want from now on," Benjamin said.

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