

Bigger convention center means more possibilities

DESPITE A sour economy and fierce competition in the hospitality business, the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority has ambitious plans — a \$1 billion expansion of the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center in the Seaport District. Authority chief James Rooney has earned the right to make the pitch.

The center, which many viewed as a white elephant before it opened five years ago, has turned Boston into the country's ninth-largest convention destination. Rooney argues persuasively that expansion wouldn't just bring more conventions, but would add to the city's reputation as an intellectual capital, jump-start development on the slowly emerging South Boston Waterfront, and create 5,000 construction-related jobs.

Over the next year, a 25-member committee will analyze the proposal. While the costs and urban-planning challenges are considerable, so are the potential rewards.

Rooney sees a near doubling of space at the 516,000-square-foot convention center as a crucial step toward making Boston a peerless international destination for life sciences meetings. Boston, which already attracts the more cerebral conventions, wouldn't have to sell its soul, even as it tries to break into the top five convention destinations. The city is poised to become what Rooney calls "the anti-Vegas." What happens here would spread to research centers and universities across the world.

Rooney isn't pushing for indiscriminate expansion. He says bluntly that the plan can't work without adding thousands of new hotel rooms to the 1,700 now in the Seaport

District. Minimally, he says, a 1,000-room hotel would need to be built as part of the expansion process. Eventually the Seaport District will need 6,000 rooms. Without them, he says, "We should take a hard look if this makes sense."

Indeed. The planners of large conventions may be reluctant to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars shuttling attendees between the Seaport District and hotels miles away. But private financing for hotels has dried up. The authority could end up asking for public support for the 1,000-room hotel — potentially a sore point with policy makers and competing hoteliers.

There are other questions. Would tourism suffer if the state and city increased the 12.45 percent excise taxes on hotel rooms now used to fund the debt service on the original construction of the \$800 million convention center? Will the plan to create a pedestrian-friendly zone around the convention center stimulate wider economic activity in South Boston and Fort Point Channel? And can the public be guaranteed that sales, meals, and other tax receipts will cover the state operating subsidy to the convention center authority, which also runs the downtown Hynes and Springfield convention centers? The authority can claim that the taxpayers are \$13 million to the good over the past five years. But no one knows what the convention business will look like 15 years from now.

Nonetheless, the authority is offering "a vision of what Boston can be," as Rooney puts it. Boston owes itself a discussion of whether and how a larger convention center can help usher the city into the future.

