



**City of Roanoke - Entertainment District Focus Group (Session 1) – 1/27/2026**

Meeting location: Zoom

Streamed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcEtp7hvdig>

Start: 6:30PM EST

End: 8:07PM EST

City Council Initiative Lead: Councilman Phazon Nash

Attendees:

<b>Forum Participant/Group Represented</b>
Shamaill Ross – Roanoke NAACP
Valerie Brown – Greater Williamson Road Area Business Association (GWRABA)
Mickey Gray – Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs
Eric Sichau - Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce
Bebe Demure - Busk Roanoke/Dust/Dawn Productions
Alexandra Crutchfield – Rail Yard Dawgs
Ricardo Stovall - Historic Gainsboro District
Tina Workman - Downtown Roanoke, Inc.
Jefferson Rose - Busk Roanoke
Matt Huff – Poe & Kronk Commercial Real Estate Group
William Farrell – Berglund Automotive Group
David Jones - Williams Memorial Baptist Church
Ollie Howie – Roanoke Economic Development Authority/ Mount Auburn Venture Partners
Jordan Bell - Gainsboro Neighborhood Organization
Landon Howard - Visit Virginia’s Blue Ridge
Benjamin Woods – Roanoke Civic Center Commission
Mac McCadden – Melrose Rugby Neighborhood Forum
Xavier Duckett – Humble Hustle Company
Anita James-Price - Retired Educator/Former Council Member
<b>City Rep./Presenters/Support Staff</b>
Valmarie H. Turner – City Manager
Jenel Few – Public Information Officer
Nelson Harris – History Presenter
Sherman Stovall – Budget Presenter
Robyn Schon – Berglund Presenter

Shawn Spencer – Charter & Support
Angelia Vernon – Focus Group Moderator
Dr. Bobbie Dickerson – Zoom Administrator
Nicholas Foley – Technical Support Team
Adriane Tasco – Notetaker/Scribe

Meeting was opened by Mr. Nash – [1:30](#)

- Councilman Nash welcomed all participants and thanked the City Manager and City Staff that were working to clear the snow/ice. Councilman Nash thanked the team that helped to plan the in-person event but had to pivot to an online format.
- Councilman Nash introduced himself as a Council Member, and thanked attendees for taking time to be in attendance and participate in the Entertainment District Focus Group.
- During introductions, Councilman Nash shared the purpose of convening the focus group
  - o To listen and learn from the community stakeholders
  - o To gather perspectives, ideas, hope, also fears, worries, concerns about what is going on with the Civic Center
  - o Gather thoughts and ideas on how to revitalize Berglund Center area
  - o Most important part of the process is to involve our community, stakeholders, citizens, business owners, everyone that has a vested interest in the city but specifically the Berglund Center and the area immediately surrounding it and the neighborhoods surrounding it as well

Transition to Angelia Vernon – [3:31](#)

- Angelia Vernon introduced herself as the Focus Group Moderator
  - o Shared reminders about live streaming; virtual reminders, Zoom platform tools and general courtesies for collaboration
  - o Gave premise for meeting as open discussion; presenters will share baseline knowledge on how we got here
  - o Round Robin introductions for participants to introduce themselves (name, organization, reason for participation)
    - Responses –
      - T. Workman – President & CEO of Downtown Roanoke, Incorporated to learn more about entertainment district and how that will affect downtown
      - V. Brown – Executive Director of the Greater Williamson Road Area Business Association interested in how it will affect and add to Williamson Road. The Civic Center is the beginning of entering onto Williamson Road.
      - E. Sichau – President & CEO, Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce, the chamber is grateful to be at the table for discussion;

represent business interest of region, interested to see what this would be and its effects on regional economic development opportunities, and the future of our region

- L. Howard – President of Visit Virginia’s Blue Ridge, eager to be a helpful resource to the city and to our region and what direction they would like to go
- A. James-Price – Retired educator for Roanoke City Schools – 35 years/former Roanoke City Council Member, as an advocate of Youth and long-term educator, interested in what resources will be available to young people
- J. Rose – Executive Director and founder for Busk Roanoke along with his business partner Bebe Demure, they provide education, access, and support for local arts community, representing performing artist in the area
- B. Demure – Realized performer based in Roanoke, Founder of Busk Roanoke/Producer of Dust/Dawn Productions, invested in the art programs and entertainment in Roanoke; interested in entertainment culture in Roanoke
- R. Stovall – President of Historic Gainsboro District; grew up in area; interested in finding out what is going on at the Civic Center and future plans
- J. Bell – President of the Gainsboro Neighborhood Organization, here to see about the entertainment district and immediate impact to Gainsboro neighborhood
- D. Jones – Pastor of Williams Memorial Baptist Church, hope to learn more about how entertainment district can impact our community; in regards to not only entertainment but economically and in terms of employment
- S. Ross – Representing the Roanoke branch of NAACP, hear more about the entertainment district; and looking forward to participating on the Focus Group
- M. Gray – President of the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs hockey team and primary tenant of Berglund. Well versed in operations and logistics of the Berglund Center. Been a tenant for last ten years and want to learn more about the entertainment district and what it would mean for day-to-day operations being a tenant of facility
- A. Crutchfield – Vice President of the Rail Yard Dawgs, how logistics impact them as a tenant and how it could change moving forward
- X. Duckett – CEO of the Humble Hustle Company, a non-profit organization based in northwest Roanoke, interested in how can we implement with our implementation of entertainment we have done in Roanoke, and to see impacts how it works with the youth and the neighborhood

- M. Huff – Poe & Kronk Commercial Real Estate Group, own a business in Roanoke City, hope to help listen and guide the best decision for our community and our city
  - B. Woods – Civic Center Commission member, a city council body task to learn more about any proposal and how it effects the stewardship of City Resources and the stability of the Civic Center itself
  - O. Howie – On the City of Roanoke’s Economic Development Authority and managing partner with Mount Auburn Venture Partners, a venture firm; excited about future of Roanoke; excited to learn more about the entertainment district and the thousands of jobs and impact to the community
  - M. McCadden – Acting President, Melrose Rugby Neighborhood Forum, impact ED will have on residence that have been displaced and the impact on youth, quality of life for citizens of Roanoke; coordinator of several events in Roanoke
  - W. Farrell – Owner/Operator of Berglund Automotive Group, name on building for last 10 year; vested interest, here to learn; entertainment district is a new concept for me; how it will impact Roanoke and beyond
  - V. H. Turner – City Manager for City of Roanoke, she is not on focus group serving as support with team and thanked the focus group team
  - Jenel Few – Public Information Officer, here solely as observer to listen and learn
- Focus Group Moderator Shared the Following
    - Sessions being held monthly from now until May; all meetings held at Berglund Center; dates will be shared following this meeting
    - Documents emailed to participants

Transition to Mr. Nash – [19:18](#)

### **Goals, Timeline, & Scope of Focus Group**

- Here to collect/gather honest input to help guide decisions about the Berglund Center and surrounding areas; here because putting off these conversations is no longer viable
- It is a pivotal time financially and pivotal time in defining who we want to be, the Berglund Center is also at a pivotal time, but it is not just aging it is struggling and sits in the center of the most important questions about economy, identity and responsibility to those who live here
- Berglund Center also sits in the center of Roanoke’s most notorious history he feels a deep responsibility

- Personal to me, my grandfather lived on Rutherford where the post office is located, he was in Vietnam in 68', things had changed when he returned home. It was a ghost town.
- It's important what we decide to do honors that history and have the community at the center of those discussions.
- The original purpose of the Berglund Center was to be a grand jewel for the city. It was supposed to be for people to drive down the interstate, or up the interstate to see this vibrant building with all these entertainment options to attract businesses and to attract people to live here, and what was once a crown jewel has now in my opinion become an Achilles heel.
- The Berglund Center now represents unrealized potential, unresolved trauma, and a growing financial burden rather than a source of pride, and that creates a sense of urgency.
- Urgency to do it the right way; with appropriate purpose
- Use to host greatest acts (Elvis, Jackson, Ozzy Osborne, Dolly Parton), no longer the case, it can be again, not by repeating the past, but learning from it
- We can reimagine an area that generates revenue, strengthens public safety, and that supports the needs of our community.
- Repair generational harm instead of creating new barriers
- We now have the responsibility to be intentional and thoughtful and forward-thinking.

Key takeaways shared by Councilman Hash for the Focus Group and to take back to City Council, for deliberation for city staff are as follows:

- A plan for long-term community benefit - Should add to the quality of life for every "Roanoker"
- Respect history while moving forward – ensure that redevelopment acknowledges the past, honors the history of the area and reflects the voices and the needs of today's residents
- Create opportunities that last – create jobs and have positive effects on the community
- Want to define City's role with regards to a potential Casino – this is a controversial goal. If not a casino still have to have the conversation about what to do with the Berglund Center
- Want guidance and input and feedback on what citizens would expect or want council to explore; and how do citizens want to see the revenues from the casino used
- Stewardship of Civic Center – some localities have changed model to private/public partnership; what potential community benefits agreements do we want to see, what are hard No's and Yes's

Councilman Nash ended the meeting with a charge –

- This group will help shape/influence the decisions the city makes regarding the property.

- Picture a place showcasing the best of our City, from trails to river to downtown, neighbors and into region

**Question:**

J. Rose – heard phrase ‘Entertainment District’ used in two different ways; what is our focus today? An area where entertainment businesses/endeavors are centered and the Legislative term – four or five areas where Casinos are allowed (Danville, Hampton, Bristol)

**Answer:**

P. Nash – Both, if we get the referendum and it passes and we are able to get a casino it is as you described. If it doesn’t happen, we have to look at how do we revitalize the space. Missing places for entertainers to gather, the focus is still entertainment. We know parking is an issue and ultimately it depends on the future and the people which one we get.

Transition to Shawn Spencer – [31:10](#)

**Project Charter**

- Draft document read aloud for participants

**Question/Comment:**

J. Rose stated he was ok with the Charter (via Chat)

Transition to Mr. Harris – [37:51](#)

- **History of Roanoke Civic Center/Berglund Center**

- How the Civic Center came to be and how it came to be sited where it is
- 1950s –
  - Roanoke Auditorium – burned in 57’
  - American Theater
- 1960s –
  - Negotiations for venue shared between Salem and Roanoke fell through (each city got their own instead)
  - Roanoke didn’t have agreement on what the venue would be
  - Bond referendum to fund Civic Center all in one place
    - It failed
  - Roanoke began to lose out on entertainment and conventions to Richmond, Norfolk, VA Beach
  - I-581 was initially to be a residential project and then shifted to commercial
    - Civic Center was built as part of ‘urban renewal’
    - Citizens could only vote on referendum if they were property owners. So only a certain slice could vote.

## Questions/Comments

D. Jones – Can you define “certain slice” that was able to vote on bond issues?

Harris – Only those citizens who owned property could vote on bond referendum. If you were a renter you couldn’t vote. If you were a registered voter you could vote in elections for public office.

Transition to Sherman Stovall – [53:47](#)

## Berglund Center Finances/Operation Challenges

- Basic information about financial performance
  - What has changed from 71’ to last 5-10 years
- FY25-26 Budget \$14.9M
  - Developed based on what is anticipated to occur during the next fiscal year (live performance, rentals, catered, conventions)
  - The City’s fiscal year runs July to June.
  - Budget for fiscal year 26/27 is being developed
  - Budget is developed based on what Ms. Schon-Smith anticipates occurring during the next fiscal year. Includes
    - Number of events (live performance events, rentals of the facility, catered events, conventions, etc.
    - Educational related activities from outside parties
    - Food & Beverage Sales
    - Advertising/Sponsorship sales
      - Book of business – confirmed live performances booked for next fiscal year
      - Hockey team as a tenant. Provides a certain level of event days, food & beverage sales, etc.
      - Booking challenges
        - Performers do not like performing over ice; coliseum must remain at a specific temperature
    - Other/Miscellaneous revenue

- Parking
  - Ticket fees
  - Personnel expenses
    - Staff of 29 FT people
    - Personnel budget includes FT and PT staff \$3.1 million; event staff may be supplied by third party contractors
  - Other/Miscellaneous expenses
    - Significant number of maintenance expenses
- General Fund Support
  - Most municipal operated civic facilities require support in the form of a subsidy
  - FY 2025 – 2026 – budgeted subsidy = \$2.517 million
    - Operating subsidy - \$.973 million fluctuates from year to year
    - Debt portion of subsidy \$1.544M – Berglund does not generate sufficient revenue that is issued
      - Debt to expand complex (almost at end of amortization) to include special events center.
      - 2012 building had a significant amount of deferred maintenance; began allocating this funding to address infrastructure related issues.
    - Capital project request that was submitted for next years budget cycle totals approximately \$23 million.
    - And focusses on total deferred maintenance improvements are probably in excess of about \$30 million. From a debt service perspective we can afford \$1.5 million; not sufficient to make a substantial headway.
- Roanoke Market
  - Roanoke is tertiary (3rd tier) market for live entertainment
    - Impacts type/size of events held
    - Looking back 10, 20, 30 years live entertainment has evolved, so performers tour for income. In the 70s touring was to sell albums. Given that we are a tertiary market it is going to be hard to attract top-tier entertainment because of the size of the venue.
    - Berglund required to co-promote or buy events
      - Co-promoting has up/down sides

- Upside is event performs better than budget that we realize more revenue.
  - Downside is if event performs below budget we take a financial hit with respect to income and profitability and meet established budget from subsidy.
  - Note event performer gets paid regardless of outcome.
- Actual Performance Impacts
  - Factors that can impact financial performance compared to budget
    - Actual number of events to budgeted events
    - Actual event attendance to budgeted event attendance
    - Actual food and beverage sales compared to budget
    - Actual advertising/sponsorship sales compared to budget
    - Other/miscellaneous revenue compared to budget
    - Actual expenses exceeding budget
- Current & Future – Facing financial headwinds:
  - Current year’s subsidy is expected to significantly exceed budget
  - Future required subsidy is expected to increase
  - Competitive pressure from other venues
    - Live entertainment venues locally
      - Greensboro
      - Ceasare VA, Danville, line up of performances
      - Patrons have a certain amount of available income to attend live events, having a variety of live entertainment venues results in it being a challenge for Berglund to compete in the marketplace

### Questions/Comments

- Jefferson Ross - Certainly, measures can be taken to attract larger acts. Tertiary market isn't written in stone.
  - Sherman Stovall – Robyn will talk about booking and co-promoting and that will answer some of the questions about challenges she faces
- Ricardo Stovall - Can you or Robyn verify that most/all civic centers do not make a profit?

Sherman Stovall – based on my experience, most municipal operated do require some level of a subsidy, we compare to others like size and those municipalities do require a subsidy and are sometimes higher than us.

Transition to Robyn Schon-Smith – [1:12:54](#)

### **Event Booking & Co-promoting**

- Full-Service Entertainment Facility
  - Meaning can handle whatever a promoter needs (Soup-to-nuts)
    - Production, Catering, Marketing, Ticketing, and Operations
  - Largest entertainment & sports facility in SW Virginia
- Provide live entertainment experience and other events
  - Concert performances
  - Cultural performances
  - Sporting events
  - Trade shows
  - Consumer shows
  - Conventions
  - Banquets
- Tertiary Market (less than 15K seats)
  - Primary market – Staples Center in LA; Barclays Center in NJ
  - Secondary market – Greensboro, Charlotte, Raleigh
  - Tertiary market – Roanoke (less than 15,000 seats)
- Robyn has been in this business for over 40 years.
- Building is 55 years old
- Employing over 250 people at major and multiple events
- Businesses around venue depend on Civic Center activities
- Hold close to 400 events a year
- Provide all entertainment experiences, i.e. concert performances, comedy cultural, and the Rail Yard Dawgs.

- Getting ready to host the 100th year of the Harlem Globe Trotters
- Get acts in the \$1 million to \$1.5 million i.e. Kevin Hart, Cirque De Soleil (been to Roanoke four times pre-COVID), announced Journey coming soon, and Billy Strings ticket open this Friday. Have hosted Elton John and Cher multiple times. Tyler Perry has been here several times.
- Venues
  - Berglund Coliseum (10,500 seats)
  - Berglund Performing Arts Theatre (2,130 seats)
    - Total facelift on the inside from LED lighting to multi-million dollar sound system paid through grants
  - Berglund Hall (11,000 square feet)
    - A little bit of a facelift with LED lights
  - Berglund Special Events Center (46,000 square feet)
    - Opened in 2008, budgeted to host 16 events that year; we actually hosted 46 events that year
    - Usually booked 2 or more weekends every month
  - Bella Vista Room (180 capacity)
    - Multi-million-dollar view with the view of downtown Roanoke and the mountains
- **Primary Geographic areas that Berglund Center draws from for live events:**
  - Roanoke Valley
  - New River Valley
  - Lynchburg
  - Martinsville/Danville
  - Strong pull from West Virginia
  - Our market is about 75 miles all around and pulls from seven different counties
- **Types of Performance and Sporting Events**
  - Rail Yard Dawgs (Hockey)
  - Public Skating, private rentals, curling, ice bumper cars, and B-League and Youth hockey
  - Music (All Genres)

- Theatre (Broadway in Roanoke and Other)
  - Work with partners in Chicago to get 5 – 6 Broadway show every season
- Comedy
- Spectacle Shows i.e. Walking with Dinosaurs, Disney on Ice, Cirque Du Soleil
- **How events are booked**
  - We take the call – promoters call
  - We make the call – Robyn is on the phone every day with acts that may have a route that could include Roanoke
  - Repeat business – we roll out the red carpet for all promoters and performers
- **Special Note**, Ms. Kathleen Ross was one of the last landowners on the Berglund property. She was able to feed the Jackson 5, Aretha Franklin, and Louis Armstrong. She fed people in her house when they performed in our theater.
- How we program the venues
  - Rental Deals – someone calls and they want to rent the building
  - Buy Talent – means that we are 100% on the hook for profitability
  - Co-promotion – find a promoter who is willing to take on some of the risks
- Challenges
  - Competing Venues Regionally
    - Caesars – Danville, VA (Had Kevin Hart, Culture Club and getting ready to have Chris Tucker)
    - John Paul Jones Areana – Charlottesville
    - Richmond
    - Freedom Hall – Johnson City, TN
    - Knoxville, TN
    - N. Charleston Coliseum & Performing Arts Center – SC
    - Charleston, WV
  - Competing Venues – Local
    - Salem Civic Center, Jefferson Center (occasionally Elmwood Park, Sidewinders who brings in up and coming country artist)
    - The Exchange, The Harvester, The Coves @ Smith Mountain Lake (SML)

## Questions/Comments

**Jefferson Rose** – Being a tertiary market venue, because of number of seats and how it affects profitability. For performers that need to book, you say you buy talent. As part of this discussion, what is the redesign or addition? What would be the floor of bumping into a secondary market?

**Robyn Schon Smith** – Reality, I don't think we could be a secondary market because it is based on population and proximity to the building and the way the theater is designed there is no way to really add seats. I think initially the plan was to add another level, in phase 4 of 5. We got to phase 2 and then had to pump the breaks to focus on infrastructure. Not going to say it's impossible but there needs to be a lot of money invested into what the building is right now before going to the next level.

## Chat Questions

- **Alexandra Crutchfield** - This time or at another meeting- I would like clarity on what the approval process is both at the state and local levels.
  - **Angelia Vernon** – I think they're probably referring to the casino or having a casino? That is something we can address at a future meeting.
- **Matt Huff** - It would be helpful for me going forward in these discussions if we could get an idea, or as close an approximation as we can get, on what the total economic impact is from the Berglund Center (i.e. sales and meals tax, occupancy taxes, etc.).
  - **Angelia Vernon** – Certainly we can take that back. The total economic impact from the Berglund Center in terms of sales tax, meals tax, and occupancy tax.
  - **Robyn Schon Smith** – Is that for currently? The taxes come to about \$7.9 million in addition to the revenue we generate.
- **Matt Huff** - Can we get a breakdown of that? Is it less occupancy and more sales and meals? This would help us to understand that external impact.
  - **Robyn Schon Smith** – Sure thing, we can do that.
- **Jordan Bell** - Thank you for the history about Ms. Ross. It might be a good idea to get a few more folks involved that lived and grew up in Northeast Roanoke.
- **Jefferson Rose** – As we talk about the proposed Entertainment District centered around the Berglund Center. Are we strictly talking about the property boundary of the Berglund Center? Because I also hear that we're talking about the economic impact of the update and changes to businesses based on Berglund Center activities that may affect traffic in front of them. For example, I was just in Foxborough, MA for an event I was working on and there are stores that don't work on the days of the home games for the Patriots that are a mile from Gillette Stadium on Sunday. What size are we talking about?

- **Council Member Phazon Nash** – Berglund Center, parking lot, all the buildings that make up the Berglund Center. The effects can be positive or negative that impact the broader community. So, we can't talk just exclusively about what's going on there without thinking about how it impacts downtown. Whatever we do have going on at the Berglund Center need to ensure it does not hurt business. We want to bring eyes, bring people to Roanoke to explore the entire city, from the top of the mountain to the lowest part of Roanoke. So, in order to, do that, we have to make sure we have folks like downtown representatives like Williamson Road represented. But for the purpose of this focus group, it is for the immediate partial self.

### **Final Remarks –**

Mr. Nash thanked the presenters and said it was a great and informative session that laid the groundwork for future sessions. He also touched on topics for future sessions.

I think this was a great and informative session and I think it lays the groundwork for the remaining four sessions. You all gave some great questions and some information that we're going to go and do some research and some homework and report back to you.

And Ms. Crutchfield, to answer your question, one of the sessions that I have planned, session 3 perhaps, I can't remember off the top of my head, but it does go over the legislative process at the local and state level. So that is already planned and, in the works, and we will discuss that at session 3.

Thank you all and see you soon.