Cajundome planning must be taken out of political arena

'We're reaching a critical stage now'

By Richard Baudouin

It's not unusual that a public works project of the magnitude of the Lafayette Cajundome should become a political football. But the amount of controversy stirred up by the civic center since its incarnation almost a decade ago has been excessive even by south Louisiana standards.

Now as the concrete and steel slowly takes shape on West Congress, the latest controversy rages—the city council has refused to name a commission to oversee operation of the Cajundome, saying it wants to first make sure that state monies needed to complete the structure are forthcoming.

With the completion date of the facility just 2½ years away, a number of critical questions about the operation of the Cajundome are going unanswered. And there is a growing feeling that it's time to put the politics aside and get down to the business of finding answers to those questions.

"There is some negative floating around. People have questions and they don't know who to ask," says U.S.L. official Glenn Menard, who sat on the facility's design committee and is considered a likely candidate for the directorship of the Cajundome. "We're reaching a critical stage now. There are critical decisions to be made."

For example:

- Is the state good for the $3.7 million which has been tentatively pledged as its share of the cost of items such as lighting and parking lot, considered absolutely essential if the Cajundome is to be functional?
- Where will the city get $1.25 million to fund its portion of those costs—as well as an additional $1 million to purchase chairs, tables and other moveable items when the structure is ready for occupancy in 1985?
- Everybody seems agreed that the Cajundome will run a deficit, particularly in its early years. But how much red ink will it generate?
- When will a director for the Cajundome be hired?
- Perhaps even more important than who is hired as director is the question of his relationship to the city administration. Can a facility of the size and complexity of the Cajundome be operated by an individual bound up in the politics and procedures of city government?
- And finally, how will this facility be marketed? What is the proper balance between conventions, sporting events and musical performances? Who should the Cajundome's staff target as potential customers?

Some of these questions, such as those relating to funding, will be answered shortly. Others should have been answered a long time ago. But the most important ones require immediate attention. The manner in which they are resolved will determine the success or failure of what could become, in the words of Director of Community Affairs Al Thierry, "one of the greatest attributes that the city can have."

City of Lafayette official Al Thierry

"We can handle it. The auditorium has been a good successful operation in-house."

Moot point

But arguments over the cost of the facility are really moot at this point. It's time to settle the issue of state funding in a definitive way. And while that entire $3.7 million is not needed now, a certain portion of it must be allocated in order to keep the project on schedule.

There is perhaps an even greater reason for the state to make its commitment. Until the city council receives some positive assurance that more funds are forthcoming to complete the Cajundome, they are likely to postpone the appointment of the commission which will oversee it. At
The city must still come up with its 25 percent share of the $5 million needed to complete the facility—$1.25 million—and will be expected to pay the entire cost of furnishing the Cajundome when it is ready for occupancy in 1985. And city officials, frankly are not sure where those dollars are going to come from at this point.

"We feel we have the money. We'll just have to move the priorities," says Mayor Dud Lastrapes, discussing the point.

And he adds that a shifting of priorities could mean cutting back on street construction to generate funds needed to complete the facility-and at the same time pressures for other services are increasing while sales tax revenues are declining.

The city has an enormous financial problem to pay the entire cost of furnishing the Cajundome is expected to run. Once the facility is expected to be the best convention facility in the state, if the management is on par," says Breaux.

While the caliber of a property manager is important, his ability to operate in an effective manner is perhaps of even more a concern. The business of facility management is first and foremost just that: a business. It requires tremendous flexibility and freedom to wheel and deal with concert promoters and convention organizations; there must be an unflagging commitment to keeping the facility booked.

"Use the auditorium as an example. That facility has in-house. That facility has been in the black for years, one of the few buildings of its kind which can make that claim."

Can a city employee, perhaps making no more than $35,000-$40,000 a year, tied up in the red tape and politics of City Hall, be expected to meet those demands? City administrators say yes.

"We can handle it," insists Thierry. "We feel we have the money. We'll just have to move the priorities," says Mayor Dud Lastrapes, discussing the point.

The city is expected to run. At one time, it was suggested that the facility could lose as much as $1 million a year after the outside contractors said it was going to have an occupancy in everyone's mind, the prospect of red ink has everyone worried. "It's going to be a burden, no question about it," says Al Simon, president of the city council.

But what sort of deficit will the facility generate? There's no real agreement on that question. At one time, city officials had felt that it would be more in the $500,000 range, but he admits that he has no firm estimate.

"We have some ballpark figures with respect to operation and maintenance," says Thierry. "While we may not have the figures, we will be in line, this is where a manager with all of his or her knowledge will help us." And Thierry adds that if the facility can achieve 60 percent occupancy, he feels the deficit could be pared down to $200,000.

Lost enthusiasm

Some have charged that city officials have lost their enthusiasm for the facility; they respond that they are merely looking out for the bottom line. But one need only turn to the Superdome in New Orleans for an example of the problems caused by in-house management. That facility floundered when it was under state control; and was only when a private management firm was hired...