UL game goers to be served by another

Cajundome ends contract with outside catering service

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LAFAYETTE — Fans attending the University of Louisiana basketball game tonight will be the first customers of the Cajundome's new catering division called Artisan Creative Catering.

In a cost-saving move, and to avoid a legal battle, the Cajundome Commission agreed Tuesday to pay Quintess Catering $237,000 to buyout the eight years remaining on its contract to provide food and beverage service.

"Over time, our customers will begin to see improvements in the concession stands, different menus, higher quality food and better presentation," said Cajundome Director Greg Davis.

The buyout puts the Cajundome in a position to reap all profits from catering at the arena and Convention Center, instead of receiving only a percentage of gross revenue earned by the outside caterer, Davis said.

A consultant estimates the Cajundome can earn $1.7 million over the next eight years.

While the Cajundome keeps about $113,000 worth of kitchen and concession equipment in the buyout, another $1.3 million is needed to improve the food and beverage operations and for staff, Davis said. Four new management employees will be hired and all Quintess Catering employees will be retained, he said.

Acadiana Bottling Inc. came to the Cajundome's aid, agreeing to a six-year sponsorship agreement for $900,000, or $585,000 in 2004 dollars, Davis said. Additional money for the improvements will come from excess hotel/motel taxes.

"It's a good partnership for both of us," said Dennis Smith of Acadiana Bottling. "We've always been interested in the community life here in Lafayette. We want to maintain and continue it."

A possible legal battle between the Cajundome and Quintess Catering over the in-house contract led to the buyout, Davis said. Quintess, which bought the contract in July 2003, based commissions to the Cajundome on gross revenue less certain costs that were not previously deducted. The Cajundome argued that the company owed it $100,000.

The Cajundome can receive an operating subsidy of up to $500,000 a year from Lafayette Consolidated Government. The $100,000 Quintess was retaining could put the Cajundome over that $500,000 cap, Davis said.

Quintess agreed to pay the $100,000 while considering possible legal action, Davis said. Meanwhile, the two entities agreed to resolve the dispute with the buyout.

Todd Wickner, a consultant with Ovations FoodService Inc., said it is not unusual for arenas and convention centers to operate in-house catering services.

The new food and beverage manager for Artisan Creative Catering is Mark Tyrrell, formerly with All Tel Stadium in Jacksonville, Fla., where the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars play.

Quintess will still offer catering services outside the Cajundome and Convention Center and at other UL sporting events, Davis said.