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Partnership creates major event, sports venue in Wythe County

First hockey season drops puck in fall 2023

WYTHE COUNTY, Va. - Professional hockey has a new home in Virginia!

Wythe County announced Monday it will lease the 5,330-seat, 90,000-square foot Appalachian Exposition (Apex) Center at Exit 77 to Apex Drive Holdings, LLC (ADH). ADH's renewable 10-year lease will bring hockey, other indoor sports, concerts and events to the center which opened in 2019.

"Southwest Virginia is a coveted new hockey market, and our group is pleased to bring this energy to Wythe County and the region," said ADH President Barry Soskin. "Wythe's at the intersection of two interstates, and thousands of daily visitors from Ohio, Michigan and Ontario can join regional sports fans for fun in Wythe County. We're going to put a product on the ice that draws thousands of people to our events."

ADH is a new partnership of experienced hockey executives, event promoters and sports and entertainment investors. The group expects to field a team in the Federal Prospects Hockey League, a growing 12-year-old league stretching from northern New York to Biloxi, Miss., in the south, and from Danbury, Ct., in the east to Port Huron, Mich. in the west.

"Adding teams in the center of our league's footprint reduces travel for teams and players," said Chris Bryniarski, vice-president of ADH. "This location has fast access for fans in Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee, and represents a real growth opportunity in terms of both play and media exposure."

The yet-to-be-named Wythe County team will be the FPHL's first Virginia entry starting with the 2023-24 season, joining Winston-Salem's Carolina Thunderbirds as the two most central teams in the league. At 83 miles apart, the two teams should be natural rivals.

"We will engage the community to get ideas for a team name, and pick a concept that represents Wythe County, Virginia, greater Appalachia and the Blue Ridge Mountains," said Soskin. "This team will have a powerful identity to represent the people who make this region so great."

The FPHL currently plays a 60-game season between October and April, so the Apex Center will host at least 30 home hockey games a year.

ADH plans to promote concerts, youth and league sports, skating events, conventions, expos and other large public draws.

"Wythe County is excited to have experienced promoters bring professional sports, concerts and major events to our region," said Wythe County Administrator Stephen D. Bear. "This long-term lease gives ADH the opportunity to create economic activity by bringing tens of thousands of people each year to Wythe County for hockey, other sports and major concerts and events."

Soskin points to youth sports and public recreation as some of the most important aspects of the deal.

“We want local kids not just to be hockey fans but hockey players,” said Soskin. “We want open skates where the public comes to learn to ice skate, learn hockey and build not just our future fans but develop future players.”

The partnership capitalizes on Wythe County’s past investments in the venue.

“Our options were to sell the Apex and take a huge loss or find the right partners to operate it and attract people to Wythe,” said Brian W. Vaught, chair of the Wythe County Board of Supervisors. “This venue should both be managed by private enterprise and generate income for the County, and this agreement does just that. We welcome ADH and minor league hockey and support their efforts to become one of Wythe County’s top tourism draws.”

FPHL players are semi-professional prospects who also work with local employers to supplement their income. The league plays a mix of international and American hockey players looking to advance their sports careers.

“These players will add to the employment pool supporting businesses that have been looking so hard for staff,” said Board of Supervisors Vice-Chair Ryan Lawson. “This will diversify our workforce, literally bringing the world to Wythe County to work and play.”

Wythe County and ADH will make additional investments in the center to make it event-ready. Planned improvements include replacing the dirt arena with a concrete floor with a hockey rink, climate control, locker rooms, improved concessions, floor-level seating and lit, paved parking. Rink design and construction over the next 10 months should finish in time for the 2023-24 season.

Wythe County must by law hold a public hearing before leasing the property, which it has scheduled for November 9 at 6 p.m.

“We expect to use the construction window to name and market the team and the Center, preparing to host indoor and outdoor events next spring and summer leading up to the start of hockey season next fall,” Soskin said. “We look forward to naming the team, engaging sponsors, creating youth sports opportunities, supporting the economy of Wythe County and Southwest Virginia, and most importantly, putting great hockey on the ice.”

Wythe County’s Board of Supervisors recently terminated the lease of the Appalachian Exposition Center Authority, which worked through the Covid-19 pandemic to promote events.

“I appreciate the efforts of those who worked to grow the visibility of the Apex Center,” said Assistant County Administrator Matthew Hankins. “Mr. Soskin and his partners agreed to a lease that will both generate income for the county and incentivize ADH to bring visitors to Wythe County who were not visiting, shopping, dining or staying here before.”

Local economic development professionals lauded the announcement.

“Wytheville Convention & Visitors Bureau looks forward to working with ADH to market our region to visitors as a destination for sports, major concerts and expos,” said CVB director Rosa Lee Jude.

“Recent economic development successes like Blue Star and Klockner Pentaplast were bolstered by our community’s great offerings and amenities,” said Joint Industrial Development Authority director David Manley. “Our exceptional quality of life will be enhanced by welcoming semi-pro hockey and other entertainment events to Wythe County, further fueling our upward momentum.”