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Critics ramp up offensive against Live Nation deal

Competing promoter hires state lobbyist; music group petitions against 'corporate entities'

by Janel Davis and Agnes Jasinski | Staff Writers

Opponents of the county's deal with Live Nation to operate a music hall in Silver Spring are continuing their efforts, both in Annapolis and on the local front.

In Annapolis, competing music promoter Seth Hurwitz has hired a lobbying team to raise questions before state lawmakers about the deal negotiated by County Executive Isiah Leggett.

And in Silver Spring, an independent music promoter is raising his own questions about the contract negotiated between Leggett and the national music giant, and has created a Web site that opposes the project.

Some members of the Montgomery County Council have been critical of the deal, which would provide the Los Angeles-based company \$4 million each from the county and the state to build a Fillmore music hall on land owned by Lee Development Group on Colesville Road. The deal still needs approval by the County Council and state legislators would have to OK funds as well.

However, efforts by lobbyist Kimberly M. Burns, hired by Hurwitz's firm I.M.P. to lobby members of the General Assembly, apparently did not convince state lawmakers to ask Leggett to reopen the process. I.M.P., which produces shows at the 9:30 Club and Merriweather Post Pavilion, has said it can operate a music club at less cost to the taxpayers.

Sen. Rona E. Kramer, chairwoman of the county's Senate delegation in Annapolis, said members of the delegation have been approached by Burns. There was enough concern by the members, Kramer said, that they requested an explanation from the county executive.

"In response, the delegation went to the county and [Leggett] came to Annapolis and briefed us on the subject and made it clear that the county did everything according to the requirements of the county," Kramer said.

Kramer (D-Dist. 14) of Olney said Leggett's explanation was sufficient for her not to ask him to reopen the process.

"The lobbyist questioned the way the agreement was made with Live Nation, and implied that an opportunity wasn't given to the 9:30 Club. ... We found out that this was an economic development deal and the county doesn't need to put it out for a [request for proposal]," Kramer said. "In fact, the 9:30 Club people did have opportunities to approach the county with an offer and didn't take it." Burns offered no specific requests of the Senate delegation, including requests to reopen the bidding process or to stall the \$4 million in state funds for the project, Kramer said.

To other delegation members, the requests have been more specific.

“Their lobbyist has talked to a lot of us,” said Del. Tom Hucker (D-Dist. 20) of Silver Spring. “They were asking to reopen the process, [to] ask the county to reconsider their offer.”

In the meantime, Silver Spring resident Ken Wingate of the Institute for Independent Music, which operates out of the homes of its five-member board of directors, put up a Web site last week called www.nolivenation.com.

The site, which Wingate said he was creating as a private citizen but nonetheless represented the views of IFI Music, has led nearly 200 people to sign a petition asking the County Council and Leggett (D) to “halt all conversation with Live Nation.”

“We believe very strongly that we don’t want ... large corporate entities telling us who to listen to, or what to see,” Wingate said.

The group received its nonprofit status in January 2007. Since then, its members have launched a weekly online radio show that broadcasts independent artists.

Silver Spring musician Bev Stanton, who focuses mainly on electronic music and has performed on the group’s radio show, said IFI Music was “empowering independent artists who don’t feel they have to get sucked into the corporation.”

Olivia Mancini, a musician from Washington, D.C., said the industry suffered when corporations “homogenized” local music scenes, and any group that spreads the word about independent artists is doing a great service. People fill venues like the Black Cat and 9:30 Club when local artists come, she said.

“There was that thinking that you needed national acts to pay the bills,” Mancini said. “But people want to see local artists. ... If Live Nation’s not going to offer that, I don’t see it as very useful.”

However, Ted Mankin, a vice president of booking with Live Nation, said he would make sure local artists would be booked at the Silver Spring site on talent nights, as opening acts to headliners or at times of the year less busy for national talent.

“Local artists shouldn’t be worried,” he said. “I hope over the next few months, people will learn about what we do and what our plans are.”

The next step for the Live Nation deal is a contract between the county and the Lee Development Group, said Patrick K. Lacefield, a spokesman for Leggett.

In regards to Wingate’s site, Lacefield said the county was actually receiving “more and more support all the time” to move the deal forward.

The council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee is scheduled to discuss costs associated with the music venue Tuesday.