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Wisconsin Center District CEO says venue near Summerfest may 'negatively impact' Miller High Life Theatre

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The proposed Frank Productions 4,000-capacity venue near the Summerfest grounds would negatively impact Miller High Life Theatre in downtown Milwaukee that has a similar capacity, said Marty Brooks, the president and CEO of the Miller High Life Theatre's owner.

When Frank Productions and its event arm FPC Live proposed a new facility in early December 2021, Brooks initially told the Business Journal he viewed it as expanding entertainment options for Milwaukee and adding to downtown's vibrancy. He also said then that the Wisconsin Center District's theater and UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena are not designed for general admission events, which would be the main focus of the proposed FPC Live facility.



Miller High Life Theatre has a seating capacity of nearly 4,100.

However, during his report Friday to the Wisconsin Center District board, Brooks gave an updated perspective that echoed the concerns of other Milwaukee venue operators, including the Pabst Theater Group and The Rave/Eagles Ballroom.

“From the district’s management team’s perspective, this does raise a concern about the addition of another midsize-capacity venue that it could negatively impact the economics of our own Miller High Life Theatre,” Brooks said.

Brooks told the board that he and his staff are concerned and will be watching how the Frank Productions/FPC Live proposal progresses. For now, Brooks said his team is not changing any of its plans for its entertainment venues in advance of a new competitor that wouldn’t start operations for the foreseeable future.

Miller High Life Theatre, 500 W. Kilbourn Ave., can accommodate up to 4,087 patrons on two tiers of sloped seating, according to the Wisconsin Center District website. Theater crews also can customize placement of curtains to create smaller-capacity houses of 2,486 or 1,229 seats.

FPC Live proposes a 4,000-capacity venue primarily consisting of general-admission floor space with some fixed seats and VIP suites as well as an adjacent 800-capacity venue in Milwaukee’s Third Ward. Construction on the \$30 million to \$40 million facility could start later this year if the company can win a series of approvals from city panels and the Milwaukee Common Council.

Brooks was not available for an interview after Friday’s board meeting, but district spokeswoman Sarah Maio said Brooks’ original opinion still stands “in the sense of having more desirable reasons for people to visit the downtown area.”

“Today’s comment was more directly related to the possible implications of having two like-sized venues in the same market, and the potential business challenges it could create,” Maio said.

During Friday’s meeting, Brooks also referred to the proposed live-entertainment facility as being proposed by Live Nation.

Live Nation Entertainment (NYSE: LYV) is a 51% owner of Frank Productions but Frank Productions CEO Joel Plant said Live Nation

is a minority owner in FPC Live in Madison and another related company NS2 in Nashville.

Live Nation says it owns seven theaters in the size range of Miller High Life Theatre and holds an equity interest in two more, according to the company's latest 10-K annual report. The bulk of Live Nation's theater activity doesn't involve ownership as the company said it leases 53 theaters and has exclusive booking rights at 21 theaters.

Executives with Frank Productions and FPC Live say their proposed facility will not take away business from other Milwaukee venues but instead will attract shows that otherwise wouldn't play in Milwaukee.

Frank Productions and FPC Live have promoted concerts at Miller High Life Theatre, Panther Arena and other Milwaukee venues for years. Examples of upcoming FPC Live shows with the Wisconsin Center District are singer Smokey Robinson's concert in June at Miller High Life Theatre and rocker Jack White's concert in August at Panther Arena.

The Wisconsin Center District is a public entity supported by local hospitality sales taxes as well as revenue from events at the theater, the arena and the Wisconsin Center convention facility.

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