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Gordy Ouellette, General Manager, Bremerton Ice Arena

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Rink of Dreams...



Greg Meakin

I decided a few years ago to write my second book, this one about my ice arena dream. Funny thing is, it will likely be the first book ever published that goes straight from Chapter 1 to Chapter 11!

Bremerton Ice Arena celebrated its first anniversary May 17th. The opening last year featured Apolo Ohno and six hundred cheering fans. The rink's first birthday party featured a court appointed trustee as the man of the hour. Special guests included a couple of very serious attorneys. There was not a skater in sight. Since December I had struggled in

Chapter 11 pending foreclosure. On May 14th the trustee was in and I was out.

The weird part is despite being choked financially and plotted against by local witch hunters, my rink had a great first year. Its resume boasts a string of accomplishments that have surprised and impressed locals and industry experts alike. Even the arena's Website was applauded last summer by *RINK* with a thumbs-up *On the Web* review. But let's back up for a moment. Who am I?

I am told I am a dying breed. I am a regular guy—call me an entrepreneur, for argument sake—who built a community ice arena. A privately owned family business, that is. Actually, don't call me an entrepreneur or a visionary; call me someone who needs his head examined!

Because I had seen so many great civic ideas die in committee over the years, I kept the project very simple from the outset—no complicated partnerships or equity deals, a straightforward mortgage arrangement for the funding, and an agile business approach with turn-on-a-dime flexibility. How this type of an arrangement even came about for a little guy is a

miracle, but that conversation is for another day.

Right from conception, which was August 2000, I came to believe this simple approach—no matter how far-fetched for what was then a \$4.4 million project—was the only way to get something of this scope actually *completed* in a non-traditional and somewhat reluctant marketplace. This knee-jerk resistance to progress and growth is of course the norm rather than the exception around the country. I had analyzed past attempts made by various noble groups. The common denominator to failure always seemed to be fear—the hesitation or inability to take it to the frightening next step. It always seemed that nobody was willing to take a risk and start writing checks.

The old cliché "talk is cheap" was obviously coined by some guy thinking about building an ice arena!

I was willing to risk it all (see reference to head examination above), but speed was also an imperative ingredient. I didn't have a lot of money and my kids were growing up fast. I was raised in Montreal

And Other Small Town Nightmares



and lived the passion for ice, but my twin boys—who had just turned eleven when I started and are now fifteen—had never experienced it, nor had most of the children in the area.

Many locals had not even set foot inside an ice arena, never mind watched a live hockey game or figure skating show. Armed with a little money (very little!) and a 100K line of credit secured on my house, I jumped in with both skates.

Without the luxury of having deep pockets, it was either get it completed, or lose everything. With my kids always in the back of my mind, it also was get it done fast, or lose the *reason* for doing it. There indeed was no wiggle room for any mistakes or delays, which in the end came back to haunt me.

On certain brutal days, I'd throw up my arms with frustration. I was *going* to build this sparkling family entertainment and recreation destination that was drastically *needed*; that community leaders *wanted*; that the public was *begging* for—whether they liked it or not! In retrospect, it was kind of a recreational and civic force-feeding.

Key supporting players participated—the city leased me the land and a wealthy private lender fronted the money for my ice arena dream. After a million near fatal twists and turns during development—including multiple location changes and the usual nay saying sabotage—ground finally broke on September 6, 2002. The bandwagon was rocking! I was amazed at how many people wanted to shake hands with me on camera.

How Easy. How fun.

Actually, let's call it an easy, fun blood-bath. Because nine months later, as Grand Opening approached, my construction budget blew up and all hell broke loose. Once the dust settled and invoices stopped pouring in, I had a million dollar problem. One thing I've learned now that I own an ice arena is there is no such thing as, like, a \$14 problem.

As long as I live, I will never forget standing at center ice last May for the opening ceremony. Valiant work crews had been scrambling right up to the last minute, and it was the first time I had been in my rink when it was completely

finished. Electricity was in the air and an evening of celebration was in full swing. Along with the Mayor, I was standing with Apolo, who I was thrilled to have in attendance. There I was, with hundreds of cheering people in what might have been a timeless moment, yet all I could feel was deathly stress and pain inside because I knew I had a million dollar cash crunch ahead of me. I guess the moment did indeed become timeless in that way.

Although I knew things would be tough as I stood there, I had no clue of what would unfold in the coming months. At one point, I theorized that of the 230,000 residents in my county, 229,000 had to be attorneys retained against me! In reflection, I'd probably have preferred being taken out back every single day for a good old fashioned beating—and I mean a solid whooping—rather than having to endure the day-to-day stress of the past year.

You know those animal kingdom shows, where a fleeing zebra is chased down, killed, and the carcass is soon torn up and picked over by a pride of lions? I only paid attention to those shows recent-

ly, now that I know what it's like to be a zebra. Perhaps other ice arena owners can relate. You know; the feeling of being so stressed out that at certain moments in the day you want to bend over, grab your knees—and puke. Fortunately, I never actually vomited, but I've sure felt close about a thousand times.

Living and working daily under a legal and financial cloud of doom is one thing. What I was completely unprepared for was the hateful fallout and complete abandonment. Because of the political and financial sensitivity associated with any project of this ilk, as well as some unique aspects to this particular one which I'll touch on later, a form of small town panic ensued. A fever to affix blame—or *create* blame—set in once the reality of my budget crisis became clear. Heck, the first time foreclosure was threatened against me was forty-eight days after the doors opened! Forget finger pointing here, I'm talking a "Death be unto Greg Meakin" chapter that took on a vicious life of its own.

For over a year now, I have beaten myself up, analyzed and dissected what went wrong with the budget. I concluded that indeed I had a big hand in the crisis—everything from overconfidence of success, to overspending during construction, to overestimating the loyalty of the marketplace. As I see it, I was personally responsible for a portion of the budget overages and mistakes—hardly a million-dollar-plus negligence. The facts and simple math dispel any notion of a single reason for my budget bust.

Any thorough investigation would conclude there were many reasons and parties involved with the money going sideways. There were many sets of fingerprints all over this deal. To magnify a few, evidence points to the warp speed of construction, poor advice and estimates from "experts," a half-million dollar surprise on site development costs, environmental mitigation and regulation surprises—you know, the usual suspects.

I now realize we were probably a million bucks off from the very beginning.

As the clock was winding down to completion, I truly believed I'd have a 2, 3, maybe \$400K overage at the most, and would solve any mop-up funding simply by leasing equipment or applying for a bank loan. I was also deathly fearful of stopping the project to reevaluate anything. Too often things never restart, or at best are delayed longer than anyone imagined. How often do big projects get hopelessly stuck in committee and often end



up an unfinished white elephant? I *had* to get the doors open, and to this day I believe I was right. I gambled. I lost.

I believed that once the community—especially the money people—actually *saw* the finished arena, I could solve any budget snag. Of any miscalculations I made, this one perplexed me the most. How could anyone raise \$4.7 million and not raise 2 or \$300K more? But once I began the process of seeking supplemental financing locally, I slowly discovered there were dynamics in play that I could never have predicted.

Rightly angry unpaid contractors had much to do with stirring the proverbial pot. Also, a wealthy local auto dealer and his wife bankrolled me in the form of a private mortgage. I had worked for them as a finance manager for four years before pursuing my ice arena dream. What I never, ever would have predicted would

be the hesitation or complete unwillingness of the local financial community to get involved with my deal, either because they wanted my lenders to co-sign any financing, or for fear of stepping on my lenders' toes. I often joke that I was thrown out of more banks than a drunk out of taverns. This phenomenon magnified exponentially once things went south with the construction budget. I soon woke up in a very lonely place.

A phenomenon began soon after opening, as I was scrambling in search of money. Not only would I experience frustration with supplemental funding, but also I found that anyone who had an axe to grind with me went straight to my lender to tattletale. As often happens, the perception in the community was that my lender OWNED the place; not simply lent me the money. I have much to do with this perception, as time and time again in the press and public appearances, I sang the praises of the lender and positioned them as philanthropists. It got to the point where I think everybody—maybe even the lender—actually started *believing* they GAVE me the money.

More than *any* challenge of building and operating an ice arena, this political and financial disrespect—abandonment in favor of the rich and powerful—was the most damaging in that it stalled the enormous momentum that existed after Grand Opening. Anyone who has juggled money—at work or at home—realizes even a humble injection of funds *at the right time* can make all the difference.

Heck, I had a laid-off skating coordinator go crying to my lender; a construction manager who deceived them in order to shirk any budget responsibility; a youth hockey director who took cheap shots after finding out I was in financial trouble; even the local paper who time and time again would cover up, or at least look the other way, from potentially embarrassing the lender publicly. Odd,

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but coincidence has it the lender was also a huge advertiser!

It's a given that major advertisers can reward or admonish with dollars. Purchasing the silence of the press via large ad contracts—or punishing adverse publicity by pulling contracts—is certainly not an anomaly in any business market at any level. We hear it all the time, where advertisers boycott certain media for myriad reasons. Common practice or not, it is nothing less than a subtle form of corporate bribery—call it a new meaning of the term “silent partner”.

In this case, however, this *quid pro quo* Buddy System fueled the most frustrating emotions within the ice arena camp, as it was simply difficult to get our side of the story out. The public record in this case is a bloodbath in itself. The volumes of public domain information were—and continue to be—ignored or deemed cursory by the press. My favorite was a press release edit made by a local newspaper, changing my title from Owner to Manager. How dare anyone imply Meakin is Owner of the ice arena he owns?

This *ownership* thing was also a large

and painful learning experience. What I would have never predicted is how many people took “mental ownership” of my arena once it was built. One would expect enthusiasm, or perhaps a desire to be involved, from folks who loved ice and loved this arena. What I witnessed from many parties, however, was a more aggressive and assumptive *possessiveness*. I can see the heads nodding around the country from those who have owned or managed ice arenas.


Strange, but some of the most wonderful people—passionate souls whose dream was fulfilled by this arena being born—would be the first to go completely berserk if things didn't go their way. I swear, anything or anyone getting in the way of their personal dream would have to be destroyed, in their minds. And that includes the guy who built *their* rink!

Despite any setbacks, frustration, or losing occupancy of my arena for now, there is no whining or self-pity here. I second-guess nothing, as I embrace the fact that virtually *anything* done differently would equal the rink simply not getting built. I'm a personal responsibility guy. Despite feeling angry at myself, and jilted because of dirty tricks, orchestrated smear campaigns

and backroom deals, I realize things can still be rescued for my family and me if I find the right investor quickly. Fortunately, money and money alone can fix this. Some things in life can't be fixed—health, family issues, etc.—but I could quickly redeem Bremerton Ice Arena and be off to the races if capitalized sufficiently.

I have no advice or quick answers for those considering jumping into the ice arena world. I have personal opinions of what I'd do next time—a laundry list actually—from budget management to the people end of things. But I'll leave that for Chapter 12 in the book!

As a regular guy private ice arena owner, am I a dying breed—or just dying financially for now? We'll just have to wait until this game of “Funding Overtime” ends, I guess.

I just hope I can tell my grandchildren that it ended up being sudden-life overtime. 

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From the Co-Editor

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rear ends and enjoy the cool comfort of our rink while still getting some much-needed exercise.

Have you thought of updating your facility's sign or logo? Change the colors or design. You'd be surprised at how many people get complacent with the same scenery they pass every day; change it to make them take notice. You could try an inflatable rooftop balloon, maybe a temporary flashing sign, or some other novel approach. Hey, get a few of your figure skaters and hockey players to hand

out coupons to your rink at a popular mall or shopping center when it's 95 degrees outside, with jackets saying “Baby it's cold inside.” Yeah, it's a little corny, but the wild and outrageous works. Think the movie theaters steal your business on the weekends? Then advertise on their screens before the movie. The rates are not that bad and you can inform the movie patrons to use their movie ticket for a free skate rental. Listen, getting people in the door is tough enough. If you manage to get them there, remember to keep them coming back. Make your rink a fun place to go for the kids, and keep it clean and friendly. —Rich Szturm

From the Co-Editor

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the magazine's content on our reader's needs. We greatly appreciate all of your compliments, and we will continue to provide you with the best information that we can.

The Stanley Cup finals were great this year, even though the Flames couldn't pull it off, and hopefully it got the attention it needed and deserved in your area. If the NHL work stoppage takes place, we will all be challenged to keep the buzz around ice hockey. This shouldn't be too difficult. After all, it is the greatest sport in the world!

—Wayne Aussem