

Inching Ahead to a Convention Center

Although New York City's action on the proposed convention center seems regularly to consist of one step forward and two steps back, the recent report of the Advisory Committee on the Convention Center Site moves the decision-making process cautiously ahead. It would also move the preferred location of the center.

The committee, under Richard Ravitch, accepted two important basic assumptions: that a convention center should be built, and that it should be built as soon as possible. The group found the studies of a convention center's value to the New York economy convincing; even with an operating deficit, such a facility would be worthwhile to generate tourism and other profitable business. The need to compete with other cities for such revenue is clear.

The committee also, however, found that the rules of the convention center game have changed over the years that the proposal has been commuting from site to site. In the time that New York has been arguing about a 560,000-square-foot structure, the trade show business has been, quite literally, expanding. The size of industrial and consumer product displays has grown to the point where exhibition managers now recommend a 750,000-square-foot facility.

This clearly sets up new criteria for the site. The committee concluded that there were only marginal differences of cost and benefit among the three sites the city was seriously considering: Battery Park City, the 34th Street rail yards, and a platform in the Hudson at 44th Street. They all have assets and drawbacks, but the 44th Street site, favored by the city until now, cannot accommodate a much larger structure.

We have consistently favored a midtown location because of the proximity of service, tourist and entertainment facilities. We leaned toward 44th Street not because it was vastly superior, but because a great deal

of preparatory work had already been completed, including design and time-consuming reviews and community approvals. Because a larger facility requires a total redesign, most of the advantage of the river site is gone. Questions of vacant land, better access and future expansion, as examined by the Ravitch committee, become convincing arguments for the 34th Street site.

But the choice of a site leaves other problems. The first is the immediate need for a study of the attractions and finances of a larger building. Next, a building must be designed to the changed specifications. This provides a welcome opportunity to improve on the largely unmourned blockbuster planned for the 44th Street site.

The most critical issue, given the city's current fiscal state, will be financing. We have always believed, as the committee has now concluded, that the convention center should be planned, built and owned by a public agency rather than a private developer. Since capital funds are not about to be found in the city's Christmas stocking, the committee suggests a bond issue to be guaranteed by a joint lease from city and state, which would share expenses equally.

A \$200-\$250-million convention center is not something that Mayor-elect Koch is going to find under his tree, and he has not made it clear where, or even whether, he wants it. Nor is he bound by Mayor Beame's acceptance of the 34th Street site recommendation. There are unofficial reports that a Koch staff memo still favors 44th Street. The new mayor may have still other ideas on the difficult question of financing. But it is clear that reliable figures confirming the need for a larger center are the first priority, and that a larger building at 44th Street raises hard questions about future expansion as well as access and servicing. It seems to us that the reasons for pursuing the project remain compelling. The next move must be Mr. Koch's.