

Fulton to spend \$6M on new South Fulton concert venue

In contentious 4-2 vote, commissioners agree to build 5,000-seat outdoor concert venue in Wolf Creek park

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Fulton County has agreed to spend more than \$6 million to build an amphitheater for concerts in south Fulton over objections that the facility is a waste of taxpayer money.

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The board approved construction in a contentious 4-2 vote Wednesday even though its construction and operational estimates were nearly 3 years old —so old that critics said they were of no value.

"This is a major expenditure of public funds," said Commissioner Lynne Riley. "We need to know what we are doing. Three-year-old figures aren't good enough."

Riley argued that Fulton has much more pressing needs than spending on a publicly owned concert venue that's sure to cost more to run than it generates in fees. She noted a report from the county's General Services Department detailing nearly \$60 million in maintenance needed on existing buildings for which Fulton already has no money.

Plus, Riley noted, Fulton is projecting a \$70 million shortfall in 2009.

Commissioner Bill Edwards, who represents south Fulton and has championed the facility for years, said the facility is a "revenue-generating project" that can be justified because of the money that shows will bring in.

"I hate to see a good thing people want being sabotaged," Edwards said. "It's direct sabotage."

The plan calls for a government-owned-and-operated 5,000-seat outdoor concert venue built in the Wolf Creek park in unincorporated south Fulton. One suggestion has the county turning over operations to a private vendor after Fulton taxpayers pay for construction.

Either way, Fulton taxpayers would be on the line for generating enough money to pay for both debt service and operations if the facility was to break even. Fulton's 3-year-old study —based on estimates from free concerts Fulton now holds at Wolf Creek— shows the county covering operating expenses in about three years.

Commissioner Tom Lowe, an engineer and developer, said the \$6 million construction costs estimates are no longer accurate. After three years, costs for fuel, lumber and structural steel have soared, Lowe said.

"Egg will be on our faces if they come back here in 24 months with a bunch of change orders," Lowe said.