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Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard awaits signature achievement

Big plans might be his best chance to claim signature achievement

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The third year could be the charm for Mayor Greg Ballard.

In his first two years in office, the mayor has balanced the budget and improved services such as pothole repair and the Mayor's Action Center call line.

Still, observers -- and not just political opponents -- say Ballard is lacking a blockbuster move, something that would create a legacy and push him beyond the label of the political novice who pulled off a historic upset.

With a list of potentially transformative initiatives on tap, this year could be his best chance.

In 2010, the administration expects to strike a deal on its multimillion-dollar plan to merge its water and sewer operations. Delicate negotiations with the Pacers could determine whether the team stays in Indianapolis. And there is the ambitious plan to revitalize City Market -- and inspire development on the east side of Indianapolis' Downtown.

Each represents an opportunity for bold action that could have a lasting effect.

"I do think he remains a little bit undefined, so a big victory could help a great deal," said Brian Vargus, a political science professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis who studies elections and public opinion. "He has to do something fairly spectacular."

Merging water and sewer utilities

The city hopes to announce early this year a more specific plan for combining its water and sewer utilities -- and who will take over the pooled operations.

The city thinks it can wring an estimated \$150 million to \$500 million in such a deal -- money that would soften what are expected to be huge rate increases for customers. The money also could be used to build sidewalks, roads, bridges and other infrastructure that is deteriorating in the city.

About two dozen companies responded to a request the city issued last summer asking for potential partners to own or operate the systems.

Citizens Energy Group, a nonprofit charitable trust, bid to acquire both systems.

Several other companies, including Veolia, which runs the city's water utility, and United Water, which runs the city's sewers, also have made bids to operate the combined utilities.

Michael Huber, the city's director of enterprise development, said that after a few months of discussions, the city has narrowed its options but could not yet specify which direction it would take.

But he would say this: The bids confirm that reaping hundreds of millions from the deal is possible.

"We're in a position to make some huge, transformational changes," Huber said.

Pacers negotiations

Members of the city's Capital Improvement Board and Indiana Pacers officials are meeting as often as twice a week to try to come to a conclusion about the team's future in the city.

Paul Okeson, Ballard's former chief of staff, who is taking the lead on negotiations with the team, said the parties need to come to an agreement by the time the Pacers' regular season ends in April.

Team officials insist they want to stay in Indianapolis. But the Pacers have made it clear they need assistance from the CIB in operating Conseco Fieldhouse if they are going to break even financially -- a factor that will determine whether they can continue to operate here.

CIB members would not say how much the team is seeking. They are trying to determine how much money the CIB would be able to offer the team and how much support there is for offering it.

Keeping the team in Indianapolis, leaders say, brings an economic development benefit to the city, a point Ballard underscored last week.

"There's no question I'd like to have the Pacers here," Ballard said. "(But) we have to make sure it's the right deal for the taxpayer."

City Market

The administration is trying to find a way to make City Market a viable destination and a catalyst for growth.

It's now mostly a lunchtime spot that has run for years only with the help of city subsidies.

The city is evaluating six proposals from bidders interested in operating the market's east and west wings, which house mostly prepared-food vendors and seating areas.

Ideas include adding a YMCA and a theater complex with space for local artists to perform and live. That proposal was made public by the Riley Area Development Corp. last month.

City leaders have not decided on a plan for the market's wings, but Ballard has expressed support for the concept of bringing performing arts and fitness amenities there. City officials anticipate making a decision perhaps as soon as this month.

Meanwhile, market leaders are discussing changes to the facility's main hall, which is now about half occupied.

A French bakery has expressed interest in becoming the anchor tenant, said Jim Reilly, the market's executive director.

Reilly said the goal is to sign one new tenant a month starting this month. Market officials have said they'd like to see more fresh-food vendors featuring locally grown products.

But the city's goal is a bit more lofty. Its hope is that new tenants will not only revitalize the City Market but infuse interest in the area -- the kind that, if pulled off, could have lasting effects for years or even decades to come.
