

The prestigious St. Paul venue might never have
been built without the tenacity of its early backers.

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Groundbreaking; first Wild game; Springsteen in March

PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTOS

THE X



Capacity

18,064

(18,568 standing room only)

Consecutive hockey sellouts

321

or every game in franchise history

First game

Sept. 29, 2000

versus the Anaheim Mighty Ducks. The Wild won 3-1.

Number of executive suites

74

First concert

Barenaked Ladies

Sept. 30, 2000

Most frequent performer

Kenny Chesney,

seven dates

Width of concourses

70 feet

More facts on Page 4A >

A place on a map where treasure lies, maybe. Or shorthand for the X-factor, that indefinable quality that pushes something over the top.

There is no better nickname for the Twin Cities' premier events arena. Ten years ago today, a group of dignitaries stood near the corner of West Seventh Street and Kellogg Boulevard and held a groundbreaking ceremony, pushing some golden shovels into the dirt and beginning a transformation of St. Paul's once-moribund downtown that continues today.

"I have a very vivid memory of that wonderful, warm day on the steps of the old Civic Center Arena as we started this grand experiment," said Bob Naegele Jr., the first and, until recently, only majority owner of the Minnesota Wild.

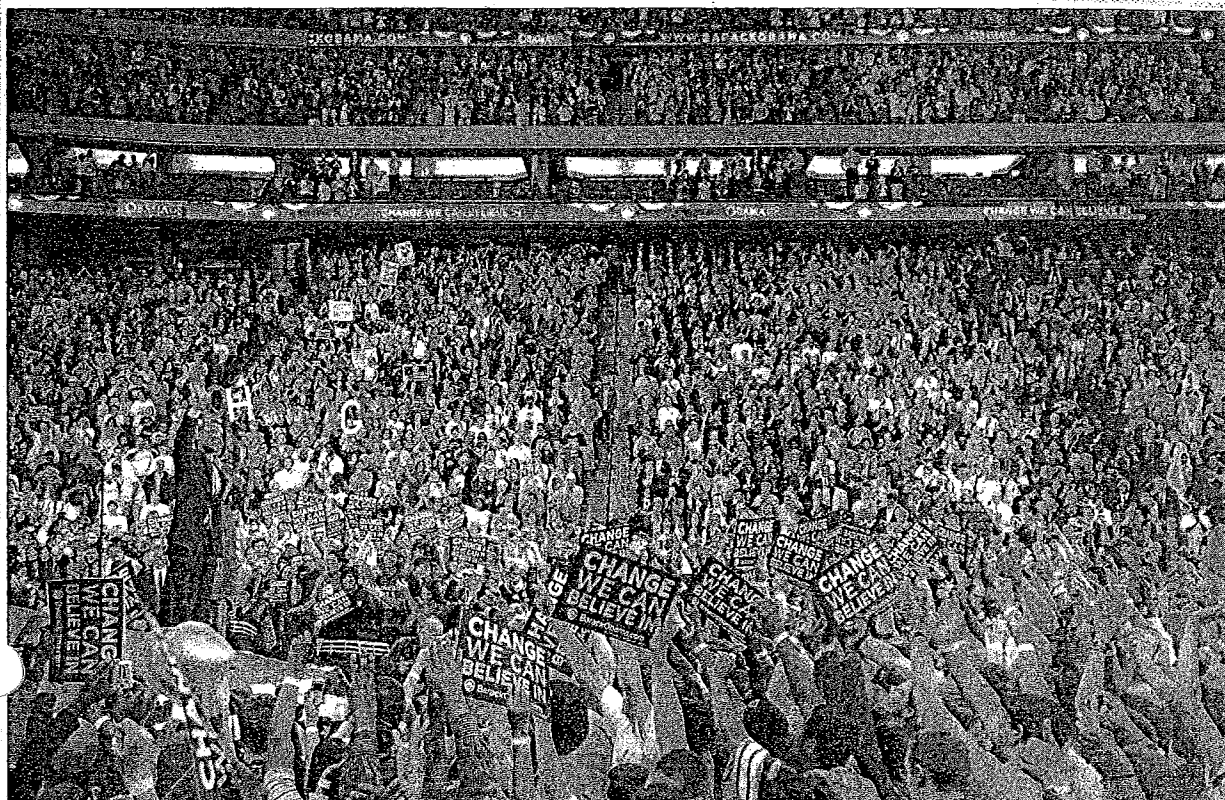
In the decade since, the Xcel Energy Center has become a piece of St. Paul's identity. To some, especially outsiders, the X helps anchor St. Paul's place in the world.

But for all the profile the venue has given the city — the Prince, Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan concerts; the 2004 NHL All-Star Game — the biggest bang looms on the horizon. In September, the X will play host to the Republican National Convention, drawing an international spotlight to a city that long has lived in the shadow of its bigger sibling to the west.

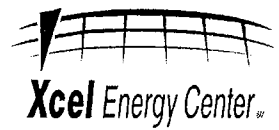
The story of how the X was built, and its continuing ascendancy as one of the country's top venues — Didn't the X help earn St. Paul the title of "Hockeytown, U.S.A.?" Didn't Barack Obama just choose it to claim his place as the first minority candidate to win a major-party presidential endorsement? — is a complex tale.

But mostly, it involves chutzpah. Mostly, it involves dreams. And mostly, it involves a group of people who wouldn't take no for an answer.

THE X, 4A >



The largest crowd to gather inside and outside the Xcel Energy Center was the estimated 35,000 people who saw Sen. Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, declare victory June 3 in the race for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. The largest crowd within the arena was for Shania Twain's Oct. 28, 2003, concert. For more photos, go to twincities.com.



CONTINUED FROM 1A

> The X

'UNDER THE RADAR'

Some stories end in misfortune. This story starts with one. In 1993, the Minnesota North Stars abandoned the state for warmer climes in Dallas. To add to the insult, the now-Dallas Stars, with young stars like Mike Modano, ran roughshod over the NHL, capturing the 1999 Stanley Cup.

But almost immediately after the team left, St. Paul — led by then-Mayor Norm Coleman — began maneuvering to bring hockey to Minnesota's capital city.

"We really were under the radar for a long time. Nobody thought we'd get this done," said Pam Wheelock, who served as both deputy mayor and director of planning and economic development under Coleman and now is an executive with the Wild.

The city first tried to lure an existing franchise to St. Paul, believing it would be easier than starting one from scratch, Wheelock said. There were dalliances with the Winnipeg Jets, but the NHL also sent strong signals to Minnesota that it would get a new franchise.

Nevertheless, some NHL owners were skeptical. How did Minnesota — Minnesota! — lose hockey?

"Our response was always, 'We did not leave hockey, hockey left us,'" Naegele said.

One big question was where to put a new team. Minneapolis had the Target Center and the Minnesota Timberwolves, and while the possibility of locating the team there was raised, it never was pursued seriously.

To almost everyone involved, it was clear — St. Paul wanted the team more.

"Hockey was the right sport," said Coleman, now a U.S. senator. "It's a working-class town. This was the right place to send the right message — this really was a city without limits. We could be what we wanted to be."

Then-Gov. Arne Carlson, an early and key supporter of building the arena for a team, remembers that St. Paul simply outworked Minneapolis, which already had three professional franchises and didn't seem to want another.

"St. Paul did a far better job," Carlson said. "I remember

physically giving the puck to St. Paul and saying, 'Let's see what we can make happen.'"

Naegele, a man who'd made his money selling Rollerblades, was brought on board as an investor. (His role as majority owner evolved over time.) The group recruited Jac Sperling, a Denver lawyer who would go on to become chief executive officer of the Minnesota Wild's parent company. Sperling had played a key role in construction of Denver's Coors Field — a baseball venue that caused a national sensation — and had contacts within the NHL.

NEEDING STRAIGHT 'A'S'

A lot of people deserve credit for construction of the Xcel Energy Center (including lead designer Ray Chandler), but one who is often overlooked is NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman.

During a visit to St. Paul, Bettman praised the market potential of the new franchise and its financial backers, Naegele recalled.

Bettman was less enthusiastic about the Civic Center venue. He rated the market and the investor group as "As," then asked Sperling to rate the arena. Sperling said it was a "B-plus."

"And the commissioner said, 'In order to pass this test, you have to have three As,'" Naegele said.

That did it: The plan to renovate the city-owned Civic Center Arena was out. It would be torn down. Boosters put together a package for a new \$130 million arena, half of it paid for by the city, half by the state. The investors asked HOK Sports Facilities Group, the firm that designed Coors Field, to design the new arena and visited Denver.

They came away impressed. There were wide, open courtyards, and every seat in the house seemed to be good, two features incorporated into the Xcel Energy Center's design. The venue often earns high praise, and those two factors are commonly cited.

"It was unlike anything I had ever seen," Naegele said. "When we flew home from that, we had a meeting with Ray (Chandler) and said, 'Ray, can you do that, but on the inside?'"

Squeezing \$85 million out of a Legislature notoriously skeptical of financing professional sports venues was not going to be easy. Carlson had pledged his support, but the 1997 leg-



Country music superstar Kenny Chesney is the X's most frequent performer, with seven dates so far, including this performance May 13, 2007, during his Flip Flop Summer Tour.

PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO: RICHARD MARSHALL

islative session — a nonbonding year — came and went without approval.

That's when Coleman made a decision widely credited with securing the franchise. Within weeks after the session's conclusion, Coleman said the city would guarantee the state's share.

You can call it bold, or you can call it stupid. If the state had failed to approve the money, Coleman might well be a lawyer in private practice now, his political ambitions truncated by having plunged St. Paul into red ink.

NO GUTS, NO HOCKEY

"Without Norm being willing to invest his political capital and Bob being willing to invest his financial capital, this never would have happened," Wheelock said.

Naegele said Coleman's pledge was the moment he knew hockey would come back to Minnesota. "When you look at the actions of the municipal bodies, you just have to take your hat off," he said.

On June 25, 1997, the NHL awarded the city an expansion franchise.

In 1998, at the cost of some considerable political capital himself (then-DFL Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe was able to hold up the bonding in exchange for promises on favored bills), Carlson secured the state's portion of the arena funding.

Carlson credits his staff for lining up the votes, and hockey

boosters like Herb Brooks for whipping up support for an NHL team in outstate locales.

"There was no upside for those outside St. Paul," Carlson said. "The role of the governor is to say, 'No, the whole state is part of our concern.'"

The Minnesota Wild eventually would contribute an extra \$40 million toward construction, putting the final price tag at \$170 million.

The groundbreaking came just as the finishing touches were being put on a previously planned renovation of RiverCentre. The opening of the Science Museum of Minnesota would come a few years later, part of a carefully calibrated redevelopment effort at the gateway to downtown St. Paul — hundreds of millions of dollars of investments that together pronounce St. Paul a city that plays with the big boys.

The designers tried to make the arena a memorable experience. At no point does a fan walk up to a seat — you always walk down. The steep upper level brings fans closer to the action and focuses crowd noise onto the ice. And in a stirring touch, the jerseys of every high school boys and girls hockey team in the state are hung in a ring just outside the main arena.

Culminating an effort that nearly died a thousand deaths, Coleman was asked to drop the first puck at the first pre-season game.

"It transformed the image of the city," Coleman said. "(Being inside) was just a sur-

real experience. ... Is this real? Of course it was real."

A study by the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce estimated that in 2008, the new arena pumped an additional \$103 million into St. Paul's economy and generated \$1.68 million in additional taxes and revenues for the city.

Its true impact, however, is still debated. Businesses along West Seventh Street have come and gone. Dave Cossetta, owner of Cossetta's Italian Market & Pizzeria, said that while the X does provide a boost, a business must stand on its own two legs to be a long-term success.

"When they were first building it, a lot of people came down here with the concept of a business driven by the arena. But at the end of the day, you've still got to have a great product," Cossetta said.

St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman said the X has made an impact on the city.

"It's immeasurable, I think. Everything from that incredible run through the playoffs (in 2003) to hosting Barack Obama two weeks ago," said Coleman, who has attended every Bruce Springsteen concert at the venue.

MORE THAN A HOCKEY VENUE

The Xcel became much more than a hockey venue. Soon, the tours started rolling in, and St. Paul became known as a must-stop for top-notch acts — the Who, Luciano Pavarotti, Paul

McCartney. In 2006, a group of people weighing four cities as potential hosts for the 2008 Republican National Convention visited the X. They were impressed with the arena and the adjoining RiverCentre, a factor that will allow media members and delegates to move from the workspace in RiverCentre to the convention floor without passing through another round of security.

"I think the venue itself is really a fundamentally important factor that the search committee looked at," said Jo Ann Davidson, co-chair of the Republican National Committee and a member of the site selection group. "Obviously, the Xcel Center is just an exemplary facility. There is hardly any spot where you do not have a good view."

The convention runs Sept. 1-4 and will bring tens of thousands of people to St. Paul, drawing worldwide attention to a city that always seems to be pining for it.

"(The Xcel Energy Center) played a role in St. Paul lifting its presence to the rest of the country," Norm Coleman said. "The culmination of that will be in September."

But there are further ambitions. Across the street from the arena lies an empty, city-owned lot. Within months after the Republican convention, city officials hope to announce a major development that will further cement the area's reputation as the engine that drives downtown St. Paul.

"It certainly does draw attention and interest to the site," Chris Coleman said, "because there is a building across the street that draws a couple million people (every year)."

To Naegele, who recently sold his Wild stake to former Nashville Predators owner Craig Leipold, the Xcel Energy Center exceeds even his wildest dreams. He couldn't have imagined that, one day, it would play a key role in bringing the nation's biggest political pageant to St. Paul.

"That's the importance of optimism. There are things that are lurking out there, in a good sense," he said. "Those are things we could not foresee."

"There were so many heroes in the development of the Xcel Energy Center. They're too numerous to name individually. ... The team of 18,000 (Wild fans) is a big part of it."

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Largest crowd (within arena)

20,554

Shania Twain's "Concert in the Round"; Oct. 28, 2003

Largest crowd (including outdoor crowd)

Estimated 35,000

Barack Obama; June 3, 2008

Number of Bruce Springsteen dates 6

Number of times St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman has seen Springsteen at the X

6

Past headliner who you would not believe headlined an arena show

Sugar Ray, Dido (tie)

Accolades

"Best Stadium Experience," ESPN the Magazine; 2003, 2007
"Best NHL Arena," SportsBusiness Journal/SportsBusiness Daily, 2006
"Best Fan Experience," Forbes, 2006
Six-time nominee for "Arena of the Year" by Pollstar magazine, an industry publication

GOP PICKS TWIN CITIES

2008 Republican National Convention expected to draw 30,000 to St. Paul.

Bipartisan committee courted both parties — down to the wire.



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Hailing the announcement were, from left: Gov. Tim Pawlenty, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak and GOP state chairman Ron Carey.



TOP CHOICE: Both parties favored the Twin Cities as a 2008 convention site, and the GOP got its commitment in first.

By ROB HOTAKAINEN and KEVIN DIAZ
Star Tribune Washington Bureau

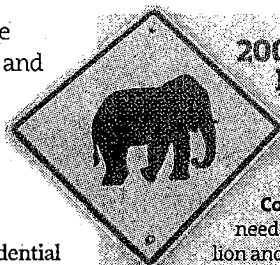
WASHINGTON

Minnesota's emergence as a presidential battleground state paid off Wednesday when the Republican Party announced that it had chosen the Twin Cities to host its 2008 national convention.

The announcement elbowed aside the Democratic Party, which also was considering the Twin Cities and was negotiating with local officials as late as Wednesday morning.

Republican National Committee chairman Ken Mehlman credited the Twin Cities' bipartisan host committee for landing the convention, but particularly Republican Sen. Norm Coleman, who faces his first reelection bid in 2008 and undoubtedly will be prominent at the event.

GOP continues: The Democrats now will go to New York or Denver. **A10 ▶**



2008 REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION

Dates: Sept. 1-4, 2008
Visitors: Up to 30,000

Cost and benefit: Backers need to raise between \$45 million and \$80 million privately from local and national sources, and the federal government will bear security costs. Economic benefits for the area are estimated at between \$134 million and \$150 million, although some dispute those figures.

Hotel rooms: 17,000 needed; most will come from 95 hotels. Republicans want them to be no colder than 68 degrees.

Buses: 250 to 300 more needed daily.

Red or blue? Minnesota has a Republican governor but narrowly voted Democratic for president in 2004. Its congressional delegation is evenly split — one senator and four House members from each party.

A BIPARTISAN EFFORT: The goal on both sides of the river and the political fence was scoring one — or both — conventions.

By PATRICIA LOPEZ • plopez@startribune.com

In the end, personal connections, a chance ride to the airport and rivals overcoming their differences helped land the 2008 Republican national convention in the Twin Cities.

On an October day last year, Tom Mason, who served as Gov. Tim Pawlenty's chief of staff, finished breakfast at St. Paul's Downtown-er with Pawlenty and visiting Republican National Committee chairman Ken Mehlman and offered Mehlman a lift.

While he drove, Mason listened as Mehlman raved about Minnesota's beauty, its fall weather and its political value as a swing state and thought "Gee, we might have a shot at long last."

Mason's next call was to Jeff Larson, a low-profile but highly connected political operative with ties to the White House and the RNC.

Bipartisan continues: Mayors pledged to get either party to pick the Twin Cities. **A10 ▶**

Inside: It's called a "sweet opportunity" and a logistical challenge. Expect protests, too A10-11
Katherine Kersten: Minnesota is a state that's searching for its political soul B1

2008 republican convention

GOP GETS DIBS ON THE TWIN CITIES

◀ GOP FROM A1

"The house that Norm built is likely to be the place where the next president of the United States is introduced to the American people," Mehlman said. The convention will be held at the Xcel Energy Center, which was built while Coleman was mayor of St. Paul.

Coleman said he was thrilled by the decision, saying it would "showcase Minnesota to a worldwide audience."

The convention, which will be held a week after the Democratic convention, is expected to bring as many as 30,000 people to the Twin Cities and soak up as many as 20,000 hotel rooms in 95 hotels. It is also certain to mean closed-off streets, heavy security and lots of protesters.

Backers need to raise millions of dollars in private contributions of money and services. Officials said it wasn't clear Wednesday whether any state or local money would be needed to defray costs of the convention. The federal government is expected to bear security costs.

The Twin Cities beat three other finalists: New York, Cleveland and Tampa. It will be the first time the Twin Cities has hosted a national convention since 1892, when Republicans nominated Benjamin Harrison.

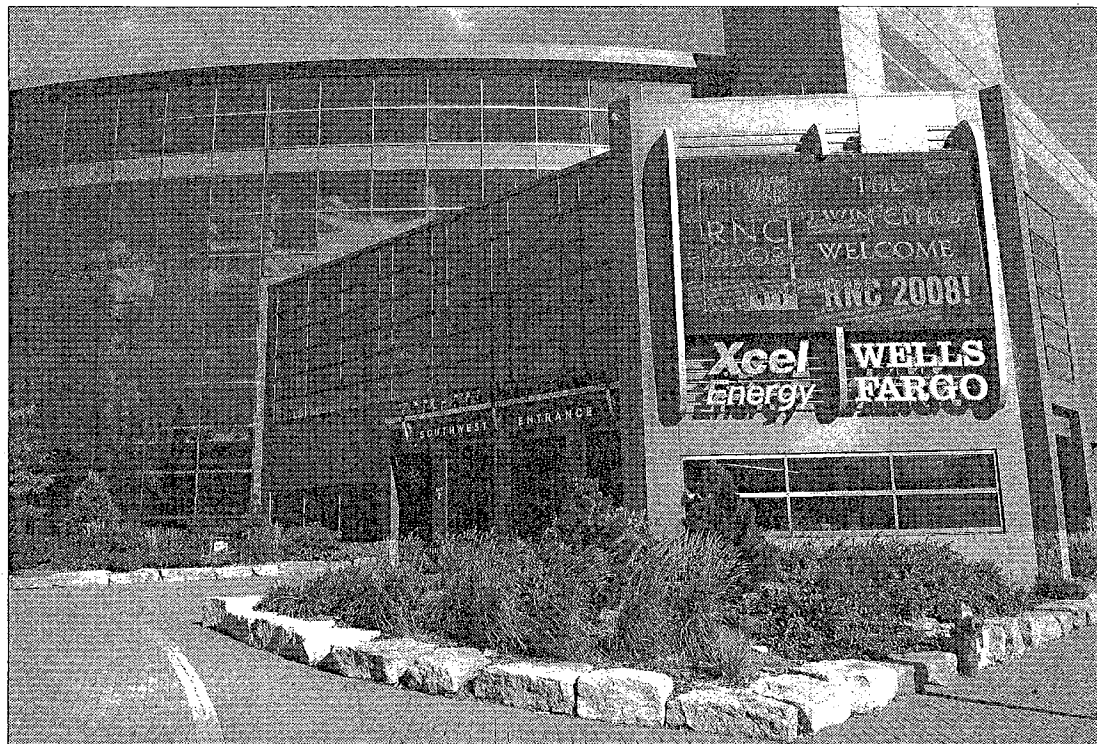
Republican National Committee (RNC) Cochairwoman Jo Ann Davidson said the GOP chose the Twin Cities in a voice vote of a nine-member selection committee. She declined to disclose the final tally but said "it was not unanimous." The deciding factor, she said, was not politics, but rather logistics such as arenas, work space, transportation, security and hotel rooms.

"This was a strictly business decision on our part," she said. "The committee decided that Minneapolis was the best choice."

Analysts nonetheless said the GOP's choice has political ramifications, allowing the party to capitalize on major media markets in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa, three states that figured prominently in the 2004 election.

Democrats wanted to come

Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak said leading Democrats were expressing an interest in coming to the Twin Cities



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Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul will be the site of the 2008 Republican convention. Hotel rooms in the Twin Cities and suburbs will be needed for about 30,000 people, and restaurants and other area businesses expect a surge in traffic.

up until Wednesday morning. He said he talked with the Democratic national chair just hours before the decision was announced but was told the party couldn't commit soon enough to ward off the Republican bid.

The GOP's decision, expected to be ratified next January by the party's national committee, drew an angry response from some Democrats who expected their national convention to be in the Twin Cities. The Democrats now will go to New York or Denver.

Rick Stafford, a member of the executive committee of the Democratic National Committee from Minneapolis, said negotiations set for next week "would have pretty much cemented the deal." He said the GOP's decision showed that Republicans "cannot keep their honor in the site-selection process." He said as the non-incumbent party, Democrats should have been able to choose their site first in keeping with tradition.

"It just follows their whole scorched-earth ... philosophy that's

running true to form this year," said Stafford, adding that "all the signals" indicated that Republicans were going to allow Democrats to choose their site first. He speculated that word got out that Democrats wanted the Twin Cities and that pressure was applied on the RNC by local Republicans to act quickly if they wanted to nail down the Twin Cities.

Republicans rejected Stafford's arguments, noting that they picked first when they took their convention to New York in 2004.

"Quite frankly, that's nonsense," Davidson said. "I have no idea what tradition they're discussing."

Rybak said that as part of the cities' bipartisan effort with Republicans, "we had promised we would pick whoever came first. We were very close with the Democrats, but they didn't make their choice and the Republicans did."

In Minnesota, city officials seemed inclined to put politics aside in favor of local boosterism.

'In grand style'

"What this confirms to us is that the Twin Cities can compete with any region in the country, any city in the country," said St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman. "We're going to host this convention in grand style."

He added that a national political convention could be expected to generate more than \$150 million in economic spinoff for the Twin Cities area. Republicans put the figure at \$134 million, although some analyses suggest that might be high. For example, the city of Boston anticipated bringing in more than \$150 million by hosting the Democratic National Convention in 2004, but Suffolk University's Beacon Hill Institute analyzed the economic impact afterward and found it actually brought in closer to \$14.8 million.

Chris Coleman joked that the impact could be greater because Republicans have more money to spend.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty interjected: "We don't spend it."



Said Rybak: "I like to party, whether it's Republicans or Democrats."

Some local officials estimated that backers will have to raise \$45 million in private contributions, but that figure could be \$70 million or \$80 million, according to Vance Opperman, publisher and prominent DFL donor. Opperman was part of the local committee pushing the Twin Cities to both national parties.

Chris Coleman said an abundance of facilities means the state's capital won't need infrastructure upgrades before the 2008 event, he said. The Xcel Energy Center would house the convention and the attached RiverCentre would also be used for convention-related activities. "There are a lot of details to be worked out," he said.

When pressed about conditions in the city's confidential bid package for the convention, Chris Coleman said it didn't include any financial commitments from taxpayers, only a promise of access to local facilities.

Both parties, Opperman said, insisted that any city bidding for their convention must guarantee it could provide 17,000 hotel rooms within 30 minutes of the meeting site. Some requirements were surprisingly detailed, he said, such as a Republican demand that the temperature in rooms not go below 68 degrees.

Asked whether he was disappointed that it was the GOP that chose the Twin Cities, Opperman replied, "I am happier that the Republicans are coming than that neither party is coming."

The strategic Midwest

"The Midwest has become strategic ground," said David Schultz, who teaches politics at Hamline University in St. Paul. "Bring the convention here, get the faithful excited, and spotlight that you care about the Midwest and farmers."

Schultz said it's also a "symbolic black eye" to Minnesota Democrats trying to keep alive the spirit of Hubert Humphrey and Paul Wellstone.

"It's a purple state now, and Republicans increasingly view this as a winnable state," he said.

Staff writers Pat Doyle, Patricia Lopez, Rochelle Olson and Myron Medcalf contributed to this report.



A bipartisan effort: The goal was a national convention

◀ BIPARTISAN FROM A1

A player in every Republican convention since 1984, Larson had been President Bush's regional political director in 2000 and had worked for Bush senior.

But with St. Paul and Minneapolis both led by Democratic mayors, Mason and Larson knew they'd never pull it off without help from the other side. Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak had reached the same conclusion after a breakfast meeting with Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean in January.

An ardent supporter of Dean's fiery 2000 presidential bid, Rybak knew he had rapport with Dean and could sell the city, but he and St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman would need help from the state's two top Republicans: Pawlenty, and Sen. Norm Coleman.

Rybak called the senator and assured him that he would work hard for either convention and that the bid would go to whichever party chose first.

When national Republicans came to town, they were feted at the new Walker Art Center, were taken for a cruise on the Mississippi by media mogul Stan Hubbard, vice president of Hubbard Broadcasting, were taken on a tour through both cities and were courted by the two Democratic mayors.

When national Democrats came to town, it was Pawlenty and Sen. Coleman's turn. In April, the mayors submitted bids simultaneously for the Democratic and Republican conventions.

By summer, talk had turned serious on both sides. Minneapolis and St. Paul had survived several cuts and were among the final contenders.

Enter Tina Smith and Mason, two operatives who had last met in the emotional fray of Norm Coleman's race against Walter Mondale. Mondale was the replacement candidate brought in 13 days before the

2002 general election after Sen. Paul Wellstone died in a plane crash.

Smith, Mondale's campaign manager, had spent those 13 days locked in combat with Mason, who led the Colemah campaign.

In June, the two sat down over lunch at the Minneapolis Club, talked through their memories and put their differences aside, intent on winning one or even both, of the plums in the political universe — a national presidential convention.

"I came away from that meeting with great respect for Tom," Smith said. "We all knew we were going to have to work together to make this happen." Together with an array of DFLers and Republicans and Minneapolis and St. Paul city officials, Smith, Mason, Larson and others set about the task of proving that they could, among other things, raise the money needed for a convention.

Three weeks ago, Larson and Mason went to a "call-back" meeting at the RNC headquarters in Washington, D.C., and spent several hours talking through the details of hosting a national convention.

By Wednesday, the race had come down to the wire. National Democrats were to meet on Friday in New York to make their pick. National Republicans had already closed in on the Twin Cities.

Around noon, Sen. Coleman put in an urgent call to Rybak. Smith pulled Rybak out of an open house meeting with constituents to give him the news: The RNC had chosen Minneapolis/St. Paul.

At 1:15 p.m. Rybak called Dean. "He told me to please hold off," Rybak said. "I told him I could wait maybe an hour, but I reminded him we had promised it to whoever came in first."

By 2 p.m., Dean called back. "He said, 'We're not ready to make a decision,'" Rybak said.

