

From the Houston Business Journal:

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## Sports, sculptures, stargazing: What could be in-store for the Astrodome

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Despite a possible legislative battle over the fate of Houston's Eighth Wonder of the World, the recently launched Astrodome Conservancy is still moving forward with plans for the Dome.

The conservancy, which was formed in the summer of 2016, is being led by Phoebe Tudor and its board includes other prominent Houstonians such as Judy Nyquist and Minnette Boesel. On Feb. 9, the conservancy presented its plan to work with Harris County and native Houstonians on developing short-term activations to open the Dome up to the public. This plan is separate from Harris County's planned \$105 million project that would raise the floor of the Astrodome to ground level. That plan is expected to create more than 500,000 square feet of rentable space, as well as 1,400 parking spaces.

Construction on Harris County's redevelopment plan isn't scheduled to start for another 12 to 18 months, Tudor said. The conservancy's short-term uses for the Dome will ideally come to fruition in late 2017 or early 2018 and would run until Harris County starts construction. The group hasn't formalized its activations, but among the proposed uses for the Astrodome is a media installation dubbed the Star Dome, Tudor said, that would involve projecting astronomical patterns onto the Dome's ceiling, similar to projection mapping.

The conservancy is considering other temporary uses for the Astrodome, including artistic installations, food and wine festivals, sporting activities and more, she said. The cost of implementing the group's proposed ideas range between \$100,000 and \$5 million, she said. The conservancy hired New York-based HR&A Advisors to develop those short-term activations.

"It's not public money and it's not tax money – it's money that we will go out and find," Tudor said, adding that the conservancy is open to corporate partnerships. "With the Star Dome, they can put a company's logo as big as the entire roof of the Astrodome."



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Phoebe Tudor, chair of the Astrodome Conservancy.

Ideally, short-term activations would rotate throughout the Astrodome, meeting the needs of a city with diverse tastes and preferences. Harris County would have to approve any plans put forth by the conservancy. The group said it's a long way from long-term plans for the Dome but hopes to formalize its short-term plans soon.

The idea of steering away from public funding is a critical part of the conservancy's approach and a hot issue for opponents of the Astrodome's redevelopment. Plans for the conservancy have been brewing since 2014, when Harris County Judge Ed Emmett proposed a conservancy approach to funding the Astrodome's revitalization into a public space and event venue. Emmett's proposal came months after Harris County residents struck down a \$217 million bond proposal to renovate the Dome.

Even if the conservancy can fundraise enough money to activate the Astrodome, the recently filed Harris County Taxpayer Protection Act might make it a moot plan. State Senator John Whitmire, D-Houston, filed the bill Feb. 14, which would require Harris County voters to approve a county project to raise the floor of the Astrodome to install parking.

Whitmire's argument is that because Harris County voters have already struck down plans to renovate the Dome, voter approval should be required for any new construction.

The group "fully supports Harris County's \$105 million plan for improvements to the Astrodome," Tudor said in an emailed response to Whitmire's bill.

Meanwhile, the Astrodome was recently given a State Antiquities Landmark designation, something that has been in the works since 2014.

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