

The Gazette

Live Nation is county's choice for music hall Leggett to announce preliminary agreement for Silver Spring with the company that runs the Fillmore clubs

by Agnes Jasinski / Staff Writer

Live Nation, a Los Angeles entertainment company, will sign a nonbinding letter of intent to bring a Fillmore music hall to the former J.C. Penney site in downtown Silver Spring.

County Executive Isiah Leggett will make the announcement at noon today at the AFI Silver Theatre.

Until a few months ago, the Colesville Road site had been intended for a Birchmere music hall.

“We’re saying now, if we work out all the details as generally outlined, [Live Nation] will sign a binding lease to signal this is who we plan to work with, here are the general terms and parameters we’re working in,” Leggett (D) said Tuesday.

John Vlautin, a spokesman for Live Nation, was traveling and not available for comment on Tuesday.

The next step is opening discussions with the community before the county enters into a lease agreement with Live Nation, Leggett said. That agreement, which would outline what Live Nation is expected to pay to lease the building, is expected by the end of the year. A provision could be included to allow Live Nation to buy the building “down the line,” Leggett said.

The financial agreement will remain the same as the previous proposal from the Birchmere — \$4 million apiece from the county and the state, and the \$2 million land donation from the Lee Development Group, which owns the Penney site. Live Nation will be responsible for paying for utilities and costs of outfitting the building, Leggett said.

Filling the building with the “chairs, tables and speakers” after construction would cost a “significant amount of money,” said Patrick K. Lacefield, a Leggett spokesman. Lacefield did not offer an estimate on how much money would be needed.

“We’re very excited about this opportunity,” Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group, said Tuesday. “I think the venue that is being mapped out is terrific and it’s going to cover so much more in terms of generational opportunities.”

Preliminary plans for the Fillmore include an up to 2,000-person venue, although Leggett said that was the maximum. The Fillmore clubs, which Live Nation took over this year, typically have room for 800 to 3,500 people.

Live Nation was chosen because the company shared the county's vision of a "multi-use facility, one that was not exclusively used by the vendor solely for their form of entertainment," Leggett said. The building could be a space used not only for live music, he said, but for community functions, such as dinner theater and corporate events when the vendor does not have a show scheduled.

The county also has a "strong commitment" from Live Nation that the Fillmore will offer a variety of music, Leggett said, "anything from rock to country, to reggae to blues, to jazz." Live Nation owns and operates more than 100 clubs worldwide and has recently taken over clubs in Philadelphia, New York and Detroit.

Live Nation was one of the companies that expressed interest in the Colesville Road site since the county announced it was ending negotiations with the Birchmere. Leggett said he received a letter from Washington's 9:30 Club on Tuesday morning.

In the letter, dated Monday, Seth Hurwitz, chairman of 9:30 Club owner I.M.P., wrote, "Upon hearing the news that the negotiations with the Birchmere have ceased, I am writing to officially express my interest in working with Montgomery County to bring a music venue to the location."

Hurwitz said a meeting with the county has been set for Oct. 1.

"We're not looking to do another 9:30 Club," he said. "The county is looking to do a concert facility, and I'd like to think that we are well qualified and hope they consider us."

But Leggett said he did not know if there was any company other than Live Nation that would work for the county at this point, and he hopes to "move forward and get this done" as soon as possible.

"It's clear the direction we're going in," he said.

Murray Horwitz, director and chief operating officer of the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center, said Tuesday that he has had several meetings with Live Nation on how the theater and music hall could work together. He is delighted that Live Nation, "top-notch producers and presenters of music and comedy," was planning to bring a new venue for entertainment to downtown Silver Spring, he said.

Rich Swanson, who launched a Save the Birchmere effort when Leggett announced that the county's deal with the Birchmere was dead, said Tuesday he was willing to give the news a "fair shake." He said he would scrutinize the plans as more details were released before deciding whether the deal was the best thing for the community.

Alan Friedman, co-founder of Silver Spring Forward, a group that has in the past expressed support for the Birchmere proposal, said Tuesday he was interested in a music hall that could help the AFI Silver Theatre and neighboring businesses, and offer music that was "appropriate for the community."

The Birchmere deal apparently failed because the county and the music hall's owners began to disagree on a number of changes proposed by the Birchmere late in negotiations, as reported earlier by The Gazette. Leggett said the nonbinding letter of intent with Live Nation being announced today provides more than the county had received from the Birchmere since negotiations began in 2002. "We'd never gotten to this point. ... We were fighting and hoping to move forward to get a nonbinding letter of intent," Leggett said.

Staff Writer Janel Davis contributed to this report.