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## McPier eyes chopper service

By Robert Herguth  
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McCormick Place plans to add a helicopter pad to better compete with rival convention halls, boost revenue and fill a void created by the closure of Meigs Field five years ago.

The Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority — the public agency known as "McPier" that runs McCormick Place and Navy Pier — is soliciting bids to build and run a helicopter landing zone atop an existing five-level, 2,000-space parking garage near Prairie Avenue and Cermak Road.

Bids are due Jan. 5, and McPier officials hope to start construction in the spring, pending government approval. The winning bidder would build and operate the helipad under a five-year contract, with an option for five more, charging landing fees and giving a cut to McPier.

Helicopter service is an amenity that could help Chicago as it goes up against convention rivals, such as Las Vegas and Orlando, Fla. Since Meigs' demise, some local chopper service has dried up. In recent years, downtown locations have been scouted for commercial heliports — including one at the mouth of the Chicago River. Noise concerns have made some of the sites impractical.

"There's a lot of business that would like access to downtown," says Katy Glynn, president of the Chicago Area Business Aviation Assn., which promotes corporate aviation. McCormick "would be very well-used."

Ms. Glynn says a helipad would boost the city's efforts to bring the Olympics to Chicago in 2016. Chicago is the only city among the four finalists vying for the games that doesn't have a public-access helipad, she says. "Is that a make-or-break? Probably not," she says, "but it would help a lot."

Anyone wanting easier access to McCormick Place or downtown in general — including conventioners, business executives and dignitaries — may use the helipad, McPier CEO Juan Ochoa says.

"Essentially, it's a glorified limo service," Mr. Ochoa says.

In 2002, Meigs handled more than 32,000 takeoffs and landings of mostly small planes. But Meigs also had helipads regularly used by corporate and charter helicopters. Mayor Richard M. Daley ordered Meigs shut down in 2003.

Steve Whitney, president of Friends of Meigs Field, says the helipad is an "admission" by city officials "that we've been hurt" by the airfield's closure. The helipad is "a good thing, but it obviously doesn't replace Meigs," says Mr. Whitney, a pilot whose group wanted the airport to stay open.

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