

\$6 million project sets stage for arts center

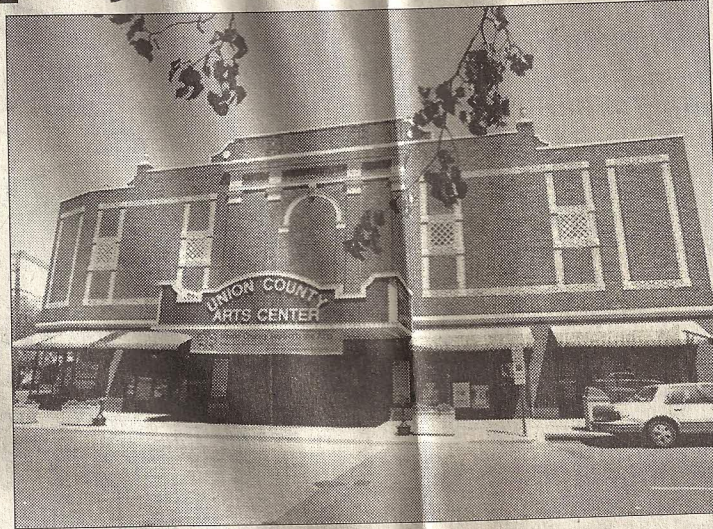
BY ROBERT E. MISSECK
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

When big-name entertainers like Ray Charles and George Carlin came to perform at the Union County Arts Center in Rahway, they had to prepare backstage in tiny cinder block dressing rooms that dated back to the 1920s.

That will soon change because the Union County Board of Freeholders has announced an agreement that will result in \$6 million in improvements and renovations to the 78-year-old former vaudeville/movie theater, including updated dressing rooms.

"They (the performers) have not complained, but last year, when we told people we would be doing renovations to the dressing rooms, they were very delighted by the news," said Sandy Erwin, executive director of the arts center.

The dressing rooms aren't the only areas being improved. The backstage expansion will include



The center was born in 1927 as the Rahway Theater. Renovations will give its facilities a major overhaul.

a rehearsal room, the wing area of the theater will be enlarged to provide more room for set design, and improved access to

dressing rooms and a new loading area will be built behind the theater to improve access for set and production equipment deliv-

eries.

The stage will be also be modified so it can be extended to accommodate larger performances. In addition, the historic orchestra pit for the theater's classic Wurlitzer organ will be renovated.

There will be a new "meet and greet" room for performers and receptions. Administrative offices will be relocated to free up more space for use of for rental within the theater.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for us to make the kinds of improvements that will allow the theater to remain open year-round," Erwin said.

She said the county and the arts center has formed a partnership under which the county will own and provide financial assistance for the building.

A professional management team and the board of trustees of the arts center, along with a [See **THEATER**, Page 30]