

THEATER

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Sprucing up its act

team of volunteers, will continue to run the facility.

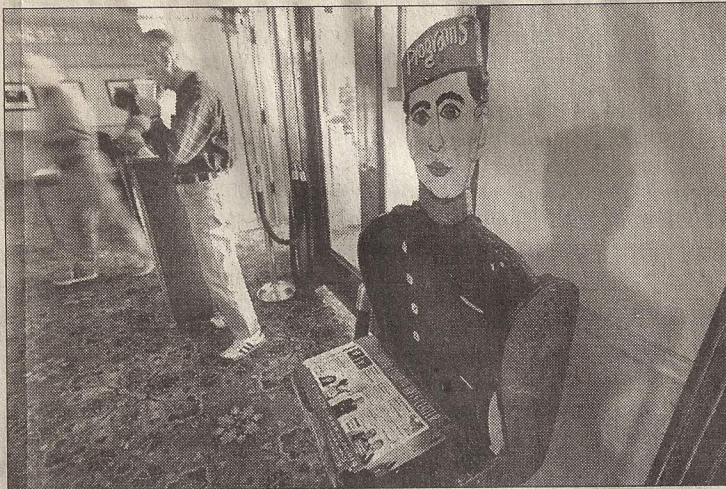
In the past, the arts has had an annual operating budget of about \$1 million. The county had been providing \$75,000, and the city of Rahway about \$300,000. The facility is also supported by contributions from more than 4,000 people.

"Maintaining a 78-year-old building is expensive and difficult, so we're grateful the county is stepping in to help preserve this historical theater," said Erwin.

Sebastian D'Elia, a county spokesman, said the agreement still must clear some minor hurdles.

"Once the architectural documents are finalized and all state and local approvals have been obtained, work could begin by the end of this year," he said.

D'Elia said the \$6 million in county funding "will not be paid in one lump sum."



TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-LEDGER

A vintage cutout of an usher holds theater programs in the lobby of the Union County Arts Center in Rahway.

He said it is likely the project would likely be bonded in phases.

"The board will decide on an annual basis how much to appropriate (to the arts center), and then will more than likely use the open space trust fund to pay for the bonds, which is a permissible use of the funds," D'Elia said.

The Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund was approved by voters in

2000. The county finances the program through an additional property tax that charges homeowners 1.5-cents for every \$100 of their assessed property value.

The Republicans have consistently disagreed with the manner in which the all-Democratic county administration has used the trust fund.

"My position as Republican chairman has always been that the open space trust fund should be used for just that and should not be used for any brick-and-mortar projects. That's simply not the way the fund's purpose was when it was presented to the voters," said Philip Morin of Cranford.

He said Republicans do not oppose the arts.

"Back when then-Gov. (James) McGreevey wanted to cut arts funding from the state budget in 2003, it was the Republican legislators who successfully fought to restore it," said Morin.

Erwin said she hopes all of the work at the arts center will be completed by next summer.

Right now, the arts center accommodates between 35,000 and 40,000 people annually.

"The revitalization of this historic landmark is also to further elevate and establish the Union

County Arts Center as a premier northern New Jersey performing arts venue," Freeholder Deborah Scanlon, chairwoman of the Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund, said in a press release.

Rahway Mayor James Kennedy said the city's downtown is undergoing a \$100 million redevelopment project aimed at sparking new jobs and business, increase ratables and create new housing.

He said he hopes the downtown renovation that includes the arts center will be "the centerpiece of a major revitalization" of the area.

"Part of the role of government is to spur economic development, create new jobs and opportunities for our residents," Kennedy said.

As examples, the mayor the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, and public investment in arts projects that help spur prosperity in both Red Bank and New Brunswick.

The theater has a colorful history.

A wealthy Rahway businessman named Barney Engelman bought a parcel of land off Irving Street in 1927 and built the old Rahway Theater for vaudeville acts and to showcase the fledgling movie industry.

The theater held its opening night on Oct. 16, 1928, with silent films and live organ music.

Over the next 75 years, the building was sold to a theater chain and then to a New York company that showed adult films until 1981, when its lease expired.

The theater closed, but a non-profit organization began a campaign in 1982 that raised \$175,000 to purchase and help restore the 1,310-seat venue.

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