

Study suggests \$16M in arts center improvements

County committed to first phase, \$6 million in renovations

By Anna Kreyman
Staff Writer

A feasibility study outlines \$16 million in renovations to the 75-year-old Union County Arts Center in Rahway, although county officials only have committed so far to the first phase, about \$6 million.

"We are just looking at the whole study as possibilities but nothing has been seriously considered yet," Freeholder Daniel Sullivan said. "There is no certain time frame on the additional phases of the project. There have been no new changes from the start of this analysis 'til now."

Sullivan indicated that the only certainty for the theatre is the installation of air conditioning.

Although officials have not yet determined how to pay for the acquisition and renovations of the arts center, one option remains the Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund.

The fund, a dedicated county tax that collects nearly \$7 million annually from property taxes, was approved by voters in 2000.

The freeholder board commissioned a \$45,000 feasibility study, conducted by NBJ, an architectural and planning firm in New York, which analyzed the future of the arts center, assessed its immediate needs and long-term objectives. The study outlines various goals, enriching the community, and enriching the region.

The cost for each phase breaks down as follows: "enriching the building," \$6 million, and "enriching the region," \$3 million.

The phases are distinguished not by number but by size because as Sullivan stated, "this is not just a refurbishing project but a cultural old Union County Arts Center in Rahway, although county officials only have committed so far to the first phase, about \$6 million.

"We have not done anything to the arts center, yet," Sullivan said. "We are waiting for the fall season to begin and end in May and that is when renovation will start."

In about 20 pages, the feasibility study presents numerous improvements to the building next door. The expansion would house a reception hall, theatre café and bar, administration offices and multipurpose rooms. Widening the stage depth, constructing new dressing rooms, installing a central air conditioning system, and expanding lobby space were suggested as the "immediate goals" of the project. The study concludes that without the "immediate goals" the theatre cannot be "fully operational."

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"Of course, nothing is certain but we will not go beyond \$6 million for the first phase," Sullivan said. "As for the second phase and third phase, \$3 million and \$7 million are the high and low ends of the funding range."

Part of the enriching the community phase includes removing the existing building at 1591 Irving St. and acquiring a house on Coach Street, which will serve as a temporary place of operation for the art center's offices during construction; creating a winter garden lobby that will serve as the connection point between the theatre and the new building; constructing a translucent walkway bridge that will wrap around all four sides of the building, allowing access to any of the four points of the theatre.

Another idea introduced by the study for the future of the arts center is the construction of a "black box theatre" for use by local schools and universities as well studio space for artists.

The center's analysis suggests that if the goals are met that the center will fulfill the county's mission of being a "regenerative force for a vibrant downtown cultural and arts district."

Sullivan agreed with the study's conclusion and maintained that multi-use centers "have a successful history of providing access to cultural, artistic and political activities to all facets of a community."

"We can rent out some of the space to aspiring actors for rehearsal and school activities etc.," he said.

The study indicates that renting or leasing space would generate revenue for operation and the creation of multi-use centers "have a successful history of providing access to cultural, artistic and political activities to all facets of a community."

Richard Stender, vice president of the Friends of the Union County Arts



Photo By Barbara Kokkalis

Although a study suggests approximately \$16 million in various improvements to the Union County Arts Center in Rahway, county officials have only committed to the first phase, about \$6 million, once it is acquired.

Center, which currently operates the facility, declined to discuss or answer any questions regarding the center. The study also indicates that the theatre has a "potential to serve as a physical and programmatic beacon for the downtown business district." The theatre employs a small staff including a manager, a couple of full-time employees and a number of volunteers that keep the arts center operating.