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NEWSPAPERS

Freeholders advance on purchase of center

By Lauren DeFilippo
Staff Writer

Purchasing the Union County Arts Center, located in Rahway, has been a longtime goal of the county's government. In 2003, it was a Freeholder Initiative under then Chairperson Deborah Scanlon. It was not until July 28, however, that the goal was actually realized.

The freeholders unanimously passed a resolution at that meeting to purchase the nearly 80-year-old building from non-profit Union County Arts Center Inc., and an adjacent building as well as a nearby parking lot for \$1,300,002. Funding for the purchase came from the county's capital fund, and not the \$6.18 million the county had set aside for costs relating to the acquisition, renovation and rehabilitation of the facility in August 2004. According to the county's Office of Public

Information, that money has not yet been borrowed.

County Manager George Devaney called the purchase a key part of the commitment on the county's part to the revitalization of downtown Rahway.

Since 2002, the county has routinely contributed to the arts center. Each year, \$75,000 is given to the center to provide educational arts programming for the community. The county also doled out \$47,000 in 2003 for a feasibility study to outline the immediate goals of the center to make it a viable destination, and a year-round facility.

Currently, the facility is closed during the summer months because it lacks an air conditioning system. Freeholder Angel Estrada, who attended the graduation ceremonies of the county's police academy at the center in June, reiterated the need

for such an improvement in his remarks at the meeting.

In 2004, the county also paid \$312,000 for construction management services for various projects at the facility.

However, throughout the years, the county has drawn some criticism for investing time and money in a less-than-profitable arts center. In 2002, the center operated at a loss of more than \$100,000. Devaney said he hopes the county's purchase of the facility will allow the previous owners to better spend their time actually running the center.

He said the group, which deferred all questions regarding the purchase of the facility to the county, has been "hamstrung," trying to raise funds, conduct improvements, and organize programming at the center. Devaney called the purchase of the center an

"economic development investment."

As part of the sale, the non-profit will lease the arts center for \$1 per year. Some of the major projects being slated for the near future include the installation of an air conditioning system and increasing the size of the stage, the county manager said.

Although once the stage is expanded, seating must be re-evaluated and acoustics examined, Devaney said. The 1,300-seat Union County Arts Center, formerly known as the Rahway Theater, opened its doors in 1928 as a vaudeville and movie showplace. In 1985, the space became known as the Union County Arts Center. Throughout the years, the facility has hosted a number of events from musical and theatrical performances to the screening of second-run feature films.

Robinson House in Clarksville