

Performance Center a huge challenge with huge payoffs

James Baudoin

Editor's note: This is the seventh in a series of commentaries from community leaders and entrepreneurs looking at the future of Asheville.

Much has been written in recent weeks about the importance of entrepreneurs in shaping what's important and unique about Asheville today. Risk-takers across the decades have accomplished so much of what we value in our city today.

These entrepreneurs succeeded not only because of the power of their visions, their persistence and their personal investment, but because their ideas had real, practical, economic payoffs. And now risk-takers are working to make our community better by investing in the Pack Square Park, The Health Adventure, the Asheville Art Museum, the Diana Wortham Theatre — and a new Performance Center. Many communities comparable in size to Asheville (such as Paducah, Ky.; Richmond, Va.; and Columbus, Ga.) have envisioned their performing arts centers as the engines of economic redevelopment — and they have been successful.

Take for example the Long Center, which opened in Austin, Texas, in March 2008. A recent Austin Business Journal article reports the Long Center's first year generated a collective \$43 million in annual economic activity for Austin. And the construction of the facility, which is comparable in scope to the one planned for Asheville, generated \$105 million during the building period, supporting 950 jobs and \$40 million in labor revenues.

A new Performance Center in Asheville is one of those powerful ideas with real, practical, economic payoffs. Its location on 2.4 acres just south of City Hall will include a mixed-use development including a parking garage and offices, as well as potential retail, restaurant and living spaces, supporting our tax base. This premier downtown location offers the opportunity to connect the recently renovated Pack Square Park with the evolving Eagle-Market Street neighborhood. Its proximity to the art museum and the Diana Wortham Theatre will create an enlivened arts district.

The Performance Center's space plans include a proscenium hall with about 2,000 seats, a large rehearsal hall/multipurpose room, a black box theater, classrooms and production facilities, including a digital media center. A large lobby envisioned as “downtown's living room” will include catering facilities, a café and gift shop.

Only a multipurpose hall — designed for both amplified and “natural” sound — will accommodate the full range of programs Asheville expects to enjoy. Programming will include Broadway, symphony, pop and country music shows as well as ballet, opera and puppet shows. The Asheville Symphony and Asheville Lyric Opera will call the center their home; Asheville Bravo Concerts, the center's nonprofit management and many commercial promoters will bring in top artists. Even with millions in upgrades, the existing Thomas Wolfe Auditorium could not meet these varied program requirements.

The center will be busy throughout the daytime as well as in the evening. Performances for young audiences will support current school curricula. Pre- and post-performance master classes, workshops and seminars will benefit talented students of all ages. Flexible spaces will accommodate meetings, banquets, weddings, even festivals.

This project will return a solid economic return to the community, in addition to educational and cultural benefits. It will put heads in hotel beds and consumers in local restaurants and shops. The new Performance Center will solidify Asheville's position as a premier arts destination.

But even more important is what it will do for community spirit, because the arts — from bluegrass to jazz, Broadway to Beethoven, ballet to puppets — are vital to our health and well-being as a community. The AACPA's next steps are to assemble the design team — architects, acoustical designers and others — and develop the master plan for the site; then we will commission the actual construction documents.

A significant feature of the master planning process will be a series of community workshops, conducted with the design team's participation, to determine how the main hall, parking and other facilities will be placed on the site. We expect these workshops to commence in fall 2010, and the public will be invited. An earlier writer noted that when the right combination of entrepreneurs and opportunities come together, what results is new businesses, renewed and new buildings, and a revitalization of downtown. That was certainly true in the 1990s.

Throughout Asheville's history, significant investments made even during economic downturns have had a lasting and positive impact on our community. Now, a new Performance Center, located on Pack Square Park beside the City Hall, will solidify Asheville as a premier entertainment destination for locals as well as tourists and energize the economic development of our community and region. That's an idea worthy of investment.

James Baudoin is executive director of the nonprofit Asheville Area Center for the Performing Arts and project manager for the Performance Center project. His 30 years of arts center experience include new performance center projects in Arizona, Georgia and Texas. He is currently a board member at the YMI Cultural Center and the Media Arts Project.
