



Downtown sees a wise investment and an ambitious idea

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The future of downtown Asheville as an arts and entertainment center improved on two fronts last week.

The Tourism Development Commission put up \$2 million toward upgrades to the Civic Center. On the same day, directors of The Performance Center in Asheville unveiled a working model of the site south of City Hall and Pack Square Park. The TDC money will make possible a \$4 million project that includes renovation of locker rooms, meeting rooms, banquet areas, the concourse and storage areas. Lower bowl seating in the arena will be replaced and upper seating will be improved. Lighting, messaging and sound systems will be upgraded.

This is in addition to nearly \$2 million already spent to repair the roof, improve the heating and cooling systems, upgrade the fire alarms and electrical system and make cosmetic changes to the banquet booms. The immediate benefit should be to keep the Southern Conference basketball tournament, and the 4,000 hotel rooms that attendees rent each year, in Asheville beyond 2012. We hope it is well beyond 2012.

Beyond that, it will assure the continuing viability of a downtown landmark that has been showing its age: Who can forget Alison Krauss getting rained on during an indoor performance in Thomas Wolfe Auditorium?

This is no little matter in terms of the regional economy. More than 200,000 people attend Civic Center events each year, according to center director Sam Powers. "It is an asset worth investing in," he said in the wake of the TDC announcement. It would be nice to dream of a brand-new Civic Center, but that is not going to happen in this economic climate.

For the same reason, backers of the Performance Center are going to have a difficult time meeting their target of a 2015 opening. Nevertheless, their task became easier when they showed how the finished product will look. It's always easier to get money when you can show donors what they will be getting. And backers need to get a lot of money. To date, they have raised roughly \$5 million toward the estimated \$85 million cost of the facility. Even if they hit their \$30 million goal in private giving, that means they will have to get \$50 million in public money. To say that will be a hard sell is an understatement.

Still, it is a cause worth pursuing. The building would provide Asheville with a first-class performing arts facility. There would be a 2,000-seat multipurpose main hall, a smaller studio theater and rehearsal space. Other aspects include classrooms, meeting or reception rooms and dining facilities. There would be outdoor activity areas.

"We are very excited," said Carolyn Hubbard, president of the Asheville Symphony Orchestra board. "It will give you good space, good acoustics, bathrooms and also a room to entertain before the performance." Lack of backstage space is a major problem at Thomas Wolfe Auditorium.

It's going to be a tough climb, but backers have completed a major stage. If all goes well, downtown Asheville will have both a refurbished civic center and a performing arts center within five years. Here's hoping all goes well.