

Acquisition targeted as investment

Union County Arts Center group had deficit of more than \$100,000 in 2002

By Joshua Zaitz
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Although the county is still interested in purchasing the Union County Arts Center in Rahway it has not come up with an estimated cost or formal plan to acquire the property.

"We're not looking at it as an arts center project. We're looking at it as an economic development investment," Union County Manager George Devanney said.

Devanney said the county has not discussed in detail where the funds will come from to purchase the arts center, however, he anticipates the county using general capital dollars.

With continually rising property taxes and the state in such a financial gridlock, some people have questioned whether the county should get itself involved in the arts business; an industry which typically is not a money maker.

According to documents filed by the arts center with the state's Division of Consumer Affairs, the arts center's total revenues in 2002 were approximately \$900,000 while total expenses were approximately \$1.06 million, an operating loss of approximately \$160,000 in 2002.

"As a taxpayer, I would be very concerned that Union County is contemplating purchasing an arts center that runs at a \$160,000 deficit," said Stuart Kline, a member of the Fanwood Borough Council and Republican freeholder candidate last year. "There may be parties in the private sector that are better equipped and better suited to operate an arts center."

The Republican party does not see the benefit of the county purchasing the arts center, said Wally Shackell, a watchdog for the GOP and two-time Republican freeholder candidate.

"We want to see a viable arts center like anybody else," said Shackell. "However, we don't believe that taking this approach is beneficial to the taxpayers of Union County."

Shackell questioned why the county can't just continue its current practice of annually contributing grants to the arts center.

"They have been contributing to the Union County Arts Center. Why suddenly go out and buy it?" said Shackell. "What's wrong with the current situation right now?"

According to 2002 tax documents, Union County contributed \$75,000 to the arts center; the most out of any government entity. That same year, the state contributed \$1,104 to the arts center, the state's Council on the Arts contributed \$29,000 and Rahway contributed just over \$50,000.

Devanney said the county is not looking to make money off of the center. "If it's something that breaks even, we think that would be an accomplishment and that'd be great," he said.

Devanney said the motive behind acquiring the arts center is to show it as a centerpiece in a revitalized downtown Rahway.

"By and large the reason we're doing this is for an economic development benefit for the city of Rahway," said Devanney. "They've got a major economic redevelopment ongoing."

Rahway is in the midst of a \$100-million private redevelopment downtown. The redevelopment includes additional housing, a parking lot, a refurbished train station, and a centralizing of certain city services such as a library and recreation center.

The arts center area was rezoned by Rahway and designated an arts district, which helps the area receive grants.

Rahway Mayor James Kennedy said he thought it was a great idea for the county to purchase the arts center.

"The Union County Arts Center is certainly the jewel of the arts district," said Kennedy. "Without that, the rest of it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. The county, I believe, sees the merits of having a county facility."

Union County Arts Center Interim Executive Director Donna Sandorse said that by the county taking over the center it can pour in much needed money to refurbish the facility, including the addition of air conditioning, which will allow the arts center to extend its programs into the summer months.

A study, commissioned by the county last year, was charged with determining the feasibility and cost of renovating the 75-year-old facility.

Currently, the arts center's season typically ends during the last week of May. The facility is too hot in the summer to have performances during that time.

"It will hopefully enable us to complete some of the renovations that were to be done," said Sandorse.

Sandorse said she was hopeful that the county would also expand the arts center to the city's stage.

"It will enable us to present programming that we haven't been able to do," she said.

Some of those programs might include larger-scale theater productions or maybe dance productions.

"Right now we don't really have a backstage area," said Sandorse. "With the expansion we'll be able to present that type of programming."