

Arts center project

By Anna Kreyman
Staff Writer

The Board of Chosen Freeholders awarded a \$630,000 architectural contract for improvements to the Union County Arts Center in Rahway which will be performed by the USA Architects Planners & Interior Designers.

Union County Manager George Devanney indicated that the amount for the design stage of the theatre is coming from the \$6-million, first phase of the renovation project.

"At this point, we have not yet determined where the money will be coming from," he said. "We are looking at either the Open Space Trust Fund or bonds."

Devanney added that there is no certain time table for this project but that "it is in the process."

Freeholder Daniel Sullivan said that "initially this project will be funded by the taxpayers," through the Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund before canvassing corporations for financial assistance.

County officials see the project as part of the blueprint for Rahway's downtown redevelopment.

"Rahway's downtown is starting to come back and we see the arts center as another piece to that puzzle," Sullivan said. "It is just another attraction to bring people around."

Sullivan added that he believes the county's arts center to be a part of "cultural development" and similar to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark.

"The tens of millions of dollars this will cost the taxpayers can be better spent," Joseph Renna, a Republican candidate for freeholder, said. "Part of the art center's mission is to enhance cultural and educational opportunities for children in an urbanized area of New Jersey, where affordable arts and culture are not readily available. This is wonderful, and even worth paying for, except there is no evidence that this is happening."

Renna indicated that there were only a handful of shows targeted for children in 2002.

"We looked at the experience of NJPAC and Red Bank's theatre — they have revived all of the surroundings like the businesses and the downtown itself," Sullivan said. "We know the shows are successful and we have good crowds already but we want to accommodate more people and more professional shows."

The arts center currently operates eight months out of the year because there is no air conditioning.

"It cannot function year-round without an air conditioner," he added. "We want to renovate the infrastructure and make it a better quality as well as more a comfortable building for the patrons. We are not trying to enlarge the structure, just better the quality for things not seen, just felt."

The building is 75 years old and currently plays host to symphonies, plays, popular acts and entertainers.

The freeholder board commissioned a feasibility study, conducted by NBBJ, 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 indicated various improvements such as 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."

Future plans of the study include expanding the building by moving into the space next door in order to lease upper levels for office space and ground floor for retail use.

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

Devanney said the feasibility study is looked upon as a guide to the upgrading of the theatre and that the only suggestions that are guaranteed

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Arts center architect hired

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to be followed are the "immediate goals", known as phase one.

The historic Union County Arts Center, formerly known as the Rahway Theatre, opened in 1928 as a classic vaudeville and silent movie palace. In 1984, the theater was saved by a dedicated group of volunteers, and in 1985, it became the Union County Arts Center. The theater, which features live performances, seats more than 1,300 people.

Currently, the theatre employs a small staff including a manger, a couple of full-time employees and a number of volunteers that keep the arts center operating.

"It was made clear that no one was going to step forward," Devanney said. "We have made our commitment. "The revitalization of this historic landmark is to further elevate and establish the Union County Arts Center as a premier northern New Jersey performing arts venue."