



Walton Arts Center
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NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

Walton Arts Center Council hears final feasibility study report regarding need for additional performing arts venues in Northwest Arkansas

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS, October 28, 2008 -- The Walton Arts Center Council heard the final report from Arts Consulting Group, Inc., (ACG) the organization hired to conduct a three-phase feasibility study concerning the need for additional performing arts venues in Northwest Arkansas. Willem Brans and Herb Chesbrough, the lead consultants on the project, presented the findings.

The report suggests the need for additional facilities as a result of past and on-going population growth. Specifically, the study finds that Baum Walker Hall is utilized to 95% capacity and that ticket sales to events have grown substantially. The University of Arkansas, a key stakeholder, has experienced tremendous growth in student population, while their ability to utilize the facility for arts programming has not increased. Additionally, even though growth has slowed in the region recently, Northwest Arkansas' population is still projected to grow substantially in the next 20 years, further straining current facilities.

The report shows that lack of space is a challenge to local arts organization. It suggests that more space would allow expansion of programming not just by the University of Arkansas, but by regional arts organizations, contributing to a richer regional arts and cultural landscape.

"There is a clear need for additional space based on the extensive utilization study we conducted," said ACG Senior Consultant Herb Chesbrough. Chesbrough went on to note that corporations and businesses have stressed to him their interest in seeing a greater variety of arts and entertainment in order to attract and retain a strong workforce. "Pop, rock and country music audiences are underserved in this market. A larger hall with greater seating capacity is needed to make this market attractive to concert promoters who supply this kind of entertainment."

The report then examined the types of additional space that would meet the needs of the community. Proposed spaces include a 2200 seat theater, a 600 multi-use space, and a 100 seat black box studio. Pricing estimates put the cost of the project at approximately \$180 million.

Findings from the fund-raising feasibility portion of the study indicated that there is community interest in additional performance spaces. Specifically, key community leaders expressed potential willingness to be involved in a capital campaign for additional facilities. However, the study also indicated that commitments for large lead gifts may be several years out, and recommends that the Walton Arts Center board focus on pre-planning for a campaign that may be several years in the future.

In addition, the ACG team addressed the issue of where additional facilities could be built. Sites all over Northwest Arkansas were scouted and evaluated. The team, including architects Pfeifer Partners, suggested that a decision about location not be made immediately. However, they indicated that as the region's cultural organizations evolve, sites in Fayetteville (adjacent to the current Walton Arts Center) and Bentonville (near the site of the Crystal Bridges museum of American Art) will offer the most opportunity for synergies with other arts organizations.

“Clearly location of new facilities is a very hot issue,” said Willem Brans, Vice President of ACG. “And while we had hoped to make a more specific recommendation, we do not believe that there is a clear answer at this time. We are planning for a facility that likely will not come on line for at least 5 years, and then, it must be able to serve the needs of Northwest Arkansas for the next 50 to 100 years, and beyond. That kind of decision cannot be rushed and must be made with all care and diligence.”

He also noted that regional leadership needs to plan for the future of Northwest Arkansas and that as these plans develop over the coming years, a decision about location will likely become clearer. He indicated that planning for a campaign can move forward without a final location decision.

Arts Consulting Group made the following recommendations as immediate next steps to move the project forward:

1. Form a Northwest Arkansas Performing Arts Facility Planning Committee of regional leaders to work with the board in planning for expansion and growth.
2. Refine plans for use of both new and existing spaces, working specifically with the University, the City and other arts organizations.
3. Raise modest funds to pay for pre-design planning and pre-campaign planning.
4. Continue conversations with prospective leadership donors.
5. Launch a regional public information and education program to better explain the Center's current and long-term space needs and its benefit to the cultural life of Northwest Arkansas.

The Walton Arts Center Council thanked the group for their work. Board members indicated that they would spend the coming weeks studying the report individually and prepare to discuss specific plans for moving forward at coming board meetings.

“We are appreciative of ACG's work on this study,” said Jerry Vest, President of the Walton Arts Center Council. “Planning a project of this magnitude that is designed to serve people twenty,

thirty, or even fifty years in the future requires great attention to detail and extreme foresight. ACG's work has laid a foundation for us to continue this planning process. The discussion of additional spaces is extremely exciting. It is an indication of the great work the organization has done over the past years. As a board member, I am thrilled to be a part of this process."

A summary of the full report is available on Walton Arts Center's web site at www.waltonartscenter.org.

Walton Arts Center is Arkansas' largest and busiest center for the performing arts and entertainment. Each year more than 140,000 people from Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma and beyond attend over 350 public events at Walton Arts Center, including performances, rehearsals, community gatherings, receptions, graduations and more. Approximately 25,000 students and teachers from 30 school districts participate annually in arts learning programs at Walton Arts Center, and over 300 volunteers donate more than 15,000 hours of time each year to its operations. Walton Arts Center presents entertainers and artists from around the world including Broadway musicals, renowned dance companies, international artists, up-and-coming jazz musicians and more. As a non-profit organization, Walton Arts Center enjoys the generous support of public sector funding, corporate sponsorship and private donors, allowing audience members to pay on average only 50% of the cost of programs offered. To learn more about Walton Arts Center, visit www.waltonartscenter.org.

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