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Future of Civic may depend on Wingspread vote

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SANTA CRUZ — The future of the Civic Auditorium, this city's closest thing to a cultural center, may depend on whether voters Tuesday approve the Wingspread Beach project.

The hotly debated ballot measure, which has divided the local arts community and become a longstanding environmental issue in the county, if passed will almost certainly doom any effort to upgrade and renovate the Civic, Santa Cruz Mayor John Laird said Thursday.

The Wingspread proposal, to be considered by voters countywide as Measure A on the ballot, includes a three-hall performing arts complex as well as a 468-unit hotel on the 66-acre Porter-Sesnon property near an ocean bluff in Aptos.

City voters, said Laird, should vote against Wingspread to stop the trend of "longtime activities and services" leaving the city for suburban areas.

Wingspread backers, however, say the city's plan to turn the Civic into a multi-purpose hall did not

work, that it was inadequate for the types of uses Wingspread will allow.

In addition, Wingspread is more conveniently located than the Civic for use by people living in Watsonville and mid-county, said Rowland Rebele, Yes on A Committee chairman.

"If Wingspread was being built in the city of Santa Cruz, I'd be for it 100 percent," said Rebele. "But the fact is, it's being built where it's being built."

If and when Wingspread is built by developer Ryland Kelley, it will include a 1,000 seat hall, plus smaller buildings seating 500 and 200 respectively. The Civic seats 1,900.

In the Santa Cruz City Council-approved Civic renovation plan, the auditorium would have gotten a \$6.2-million facelift. The renovation would have included a redesigned interior that would convert the main hall into an adjustable-size theater capable of handling smaller events as well as bigger ones.

The plan, developed at a cost of \$30,000 in 1985 by a team of city-

hired consultants, never got off the ground. The problem was how to finance it.

In 1986, the City Council paid a Los Angeles consultant \$15,000 for a study on the financial feasibility of the renovation plan.

The council wanted to find out if the money could be raised through private and government sources.

The report said the only way the city could raise the money would be to ask voters to approve a bond issue — meaning that the city would go out and borrow the money.

The city has no plan to upgrade the Civic using General Fund monies, said City Manager Richard Wilson. A voter-approved bond issue, as suggested by the city-hired consultant, would have to be secured by city tax revenues, said Wilson. The Civic currently is a money-loser — costing the city approximately \$100,000 more than it brings in, said Wilson.

In the initial renovation study, the consultants found that even a new, improved auditorium would not be able to generate much in the way of profits.

The Wingspread performing arts complex will be subsidized by hotel-room revenues, under terms of an agreement between the project's developer and the county of Santa Cruz.

But the Civic is still the biggest showplace in town — and Laird

would like it to stay that way. However for that to happen, Wingspread will have to fold up.

"If Wingspread goes down, the only option would be the Civic," he said. "We'd have a good chance of reviving it."

If Wingspread passes? The city's hopes for a better, brighter, bigger Civic would be "out the window," said Laird.

But Wingspread backer Rebele said that the city's renovation plan was inadequate for the Santa Cruz

County Symphony, among other arts' groups. The flexible-seating plan tried to be "all things for all people" and thus failed to be adequate for any specific group, Rebele said.

The three Wingspread halls, said Rebele, solve the problem — each would have a specific use. The largest would be for the symphony, the 500-seat hall for theater and the 200-seat studio for "innovative" uses, said Rebele.

But Laird said that the 1985 reno-

vation plan could be changed — if Wingspread is defeated. The plan may be too expensive, considering the city's current fiscal difficulties, he said. Nor is the design cast in concrete.

When the 1985 plan was approved, said Laird, the council and the consultants "tried to please as many groups as they could. In coming back around, we would have to choose community-backed priorities."

The Civic is closed now until July 1 for removal of asbestos insulation and pipe wrapping. The auditorium and its conference rooms are used for just about everything save summit meetings — rock concerts, surf films, seniors' events, gem shows, Jesse Jackson speeches, basketball tournaments and trade shows. But the building is old — it was built in 1939 under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Federal Works Program — and complaints have been heard about poor acoustics, inadequate dressing-room facilities and bad sight lines from the balcony seats.