

# Who's going to Build a Performing Arts Center?

*Cultural groups agree on the need, but no one wants to take the lead.*

**MARSHA STERLING**

**W**HEN the Oakland Symphony played the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium two years ago, the musicians came away with two distinctly different opinions of Santa Cruz: They loved the audience and hated the facility.

To any who still think Santa Cruz culture is a form of bacteria, the boom can be characterized by a string of well-recognized names like The Cabrillo Music Festival, Bear Republic Theatre, The Santa Cruz Symphony, Santa Cruz Repertory Theatre, Tandy Beal & Company, and hosts of other active goings-on. Our home-grown cultural resources are rivalled in importance only by the tremendous access we have to resources from the entire wider Bay Area. But culture in Santa Cruz literally has no place to play.

In 1978, concerned citizens and groups did what is traditionally done with any hot-potato civic issue that cries for solutions: they formed a committee. The Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County did its first facilities study in that year and chose as its priority an interim focus on the milder problems of programs and their own organizational growth and development before tackling the inevitable sticky question of performing arts facilities. Last year, under the gun of publicity generated by the proposed Hare, Brewer & Kelley Wingspread project, the Cultural Council was ready to try again.

Since last September, the 20-plus committee members have heatedly discussed and debated the issue of a performing arts center on at least four separate occasions and come up with what, in the words of Cultural Council Executive Director Beverly Grova, can be called "no grand pronouncements." Needs surveys that were done among local arts and community groups indicated that the greatest need is currently a major 1000-2000 seat hall with better-than-adequate musical acoustics. The fact that there is no such existing facility makes this a tight, tense community issue with high stakes and as many differing opinions as vocal opinion-givers.

"We're all at the limits of our expansion without a better performing arts facility. The potential audiences are out there, but

with inadequate halls and acoustics, we can't grow," explains Michael Stamp, general manager of The Santa Cruz County Symphony Association.

Last year, The Cabrillo Music Festival sold out 99% of their seats. But Laurie MacDougall, their executive director, reminds us that the Cabrillo Theater seats only 540. "Our growth is now stopped," she says, "and they've been talking about a larger facility for almost ten years. It's nothing new. But now it's not just something that'd be nice if it happened. It's become a necessity."

Necessity is the mother of invention and, curiously enough, at about the same time things began to get culturally tight around Santa Cruz, a local development interest invented a project called Wingspread. This complex and multi-faceted mini-city by the developers of Pajaro Dunes was to be located mid-county on the Porter-Sesnon property and to include a more-than-adequate performing arts center as an integral part of the proposal.

This has touched off a Hatfield-McCoy war between environmentalists and developers where the issue of a performing arts center was held hostage for a time. Charlene Morgan, herself a member of the Cultural Council's facilities committee, stated the pro-Wingspread position as, "If we don't get a performing arts center with Wingspread, then we will not see a performing arts center in our lifetime."

County Supervisor Gary Patton, also on the Cultural Council's committee, reminds us that Wingspread was only one proposal by one developer on one piece of county land and that the county itself dictated other uses as the best usage of that particular tract of land. Currently, it is on-track towards State purchase.

His wry comment on the final downfall of the proposed performing arts center complex was, "Who wants to go to the theatre in the middle of a freeway interchange?"

Instead, Patton favors a more urbanized approach to site selection that would create a central "cultural district" a la San Francisco or New York, with economically-renewed shops and restaurants in close proximity. But he warns that "Santa Cruz should not attempt to become grandiose about its position in the world." And then there's the obvious problem of the



urban land-availability. Where are our open urban spaces?

This question has taken the site committee on a merry chase through Santa Cruz County, with stops at Neary Lagoon, UCSC, the "courthouse annex" euphemism for our current Jail/Octagon Museum complex, the Loudon Nelson Center, The Del Mar Theater, and back to the question of renovating the Civic Auditorium.

As a logical next step, the Civic would be ideal but for one big barrier: the facility, built as "a glorified basketball court," is the only flat-space floor in the County and more-than-adequately serves that vital function year-round for its users. If the Civic were renovated, it would have to be in such a way that the activities that currently occur there can be accommodated; which means, quite bluntly, a flat floor

and retractable seating. This raises the same objections to renovation of the Civic as to the current quasi-performing arts usages: retractable seating restricts visibility and comfort.

With that, the Cultural Council has returned, for all practical purposes, to square one. They have national studies showing how the arts affect local economies, but so far there have been no pointed local studies. And most arts groups, even when they're running at their strongest, run into red ink.

The Cultural Council is still actively looking for an all-around solution, lying somewhere just over the rainbow to the left of the pot of gold. Financing hasn't even become an issue at this stage. In fact, the biggest issue is still whether there will be any stage at all. •