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Business Section

Behind One Curtain

By Peggy McGlone
Star Ledger Staff

New Brunswick's cultural institutions have been loosely connected for years, but the city's two theatres, performing arts center, ballet company and arts conservatory have never really worked together.

That's about to change.

Pushed by the New Brunswick Development Corp., the city's cultural organizations are being asked to collectively rethink their operations – to behave less like, well, artists and more like the important businesses they are.

It may sound like a no-brainer – something that happens all the time in the for-profit business world. But the reorganization and collaboration under way in New Brunswick is radical in the world of nonprofit arts, where creativity has a decidedly individualistic streak.

“The arts are not efficient,” said Christopher Paladino, president of the New Brunswick Development Corp, or Devco, which was founded in the mid-1970's to spearhead redevelopment. “We're going to take some private-sector economic development strategies and try to make them work for the arts.”

Paladino is quick to point out that the theaters have played a vital role in the city's redevelopment for two decades. But he and the cultural groups themselves say the arts in New Brunswick could achieve much more. The George Street Playhouse is shoehorned into an old YMCA building; the American Repertory Ballet is crowded into a studio on the other side of town. Both could benefit from a modern facility.

The goal is not only to take the arts to a new level, but to bring more people into the city. More arts patrons means more people parking their cars, eating at restaurants, staying in hotels, even buying apartments. The economic effect could be huge.

Everything is on the table. At the very least, the member companies – George Street, the Ballet, the State Theatre, Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts and the budget-crippled Crossroads Theatre Company – will team up on marketing and fund-raising and consolidate everything from ticket services to maintenance contracts.

But some of the players envision more sweeping changes, including construction of a new facility with multiple stages, high-tech rehearsal space and studios for teaching. The model isn't so much the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, with one

organization running a main hall and smaller stage, but Lincoln Center in New York, encompassing multiple stages that host a range of performances, from music to drama to dance.

“You will find other examples where the cultural community is a major engine of revitalization...but I don’t know if you’re going to find one that is any more innovative than what we see trying to happen in New Brunswick,” said David Miller, acting executive director of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. “This is a quantum leap.”

Getting the arts organizations to think collectively won’t be easy, those involved acknowledge. Producers and performers are more interested in artistic expression, and they worry that losing autonomy could affect their art. But it’s a risk they’re willing to take.

“The initial reaction from most of us is, ‘Every man for himself,’” said David Gray, executive director of the American Repertory Ballet. “But I’m thinking of the picture of the peasants during the French Revolution, fighting over a rat. If you win, you still end up eating rat. By working together, maybe we can bag bigger game.”

Plays and Parking Revenue

The city’s arts groups – collectively known as the New Brunswick Cultural Center – were center stage for the first wave of economic revitalization more than 20 years ago, when Johnson & Johnson built its world headquarters and the Hyatt hotel moved to town.

“But for the cultural center and its members, I don’t think we would be where we are in terms of the redevelopment of the city,” Paladino said.

Today, the arts are a \$30 million industry in New Brunswick, attracting more than 350,000 people annually to the city’s downtown. Devco reports the city’s parking revenue has jumped 300 percent during the past eight years, and the number of restaurants has doubled during that time.

“Economically speaking, the cultural center is important as a seed,” said Francis Schott, whose restaurant, Stage Left, is next door to the three theatres. “New Brunswick has been very wise in using the theatre to enhance the business community and making it in the business community’s interest to help the arts.”

But business as usual is no longer good enough, Paladino and arts leaders say.

The sluggish economy continues to hurt all nonprofits, which have been buffeted by simultaneous cuts in corporation and foundation giving. Add to that Gov. James E. McGreevey’s proposal to severely cut state arts funding, which would affect the \$600,000 in operational grants New Brunswick’s arts groups receive.

“Difficult economic times are the best times to reorganize and approach things differently,” said Paladino. “It sets the stage to exploit (future) good times.”

The Model: Sports Venues

Each of the member companies brings its unique history and mission to the cultural center. George Street Playhouse and the American Repertory Ballet put on their own productions, while the State Theatre presents the work of others. State and George Street have their own stages; the ballet does not.

But there's a lot of overlap. Each company raises money to subsidize its programming, each markets its product to audiences and offers educational and outreach programs to the larger community. They all sell tickets and build store scenery, props and costumes.

Add to the mix the academic resource that is Mason Gross, the undergraduate and graduate arts school of Rutgers, and there is much room for cost-saving collaborations.

"Together, we have a lot of resources," said George Stauffewr, dean of Mason Gross, located up the street from the three theatres. "We are training students to make their way in the professional world. The more (they) begin to mix with professional artists, the better prepared they are to become a part of the arts community."

Paladino does not doubt the plan will lead to exciting artistic collaborations, but he's more interested in the economic benefits for New Brunswick.

"(We need to) look at cultural venues like people who run sports venues. How do you use the building as many nights a year as possible?" Paladino said.

Currently, George Street Playhouse has 200 performances a year spread out over 25 weeks. That leaves 27 weeks – half the year – when the theater company is covering the costs of the facility but not generating revenue. Paladino frowns on such inefficiency, but he has a quick fix: Open up the space to the ballet or other performance groups so the theater is never dark.

"If we have a rehearsal room (that can serve as a stage), can I squeeze out 20 more nights that we didn't have before? At 300 people a night, that's 6,000 more people coming to New Brunswick that are going to go to dinner," Paladino said.

Devco sees such improvements as a boon for business, but the artists are also intrigued. Bat Abbit, a dancer for the ballet, said updating its facilities would increase the company's visibility and reinforce its importance to the city.

"Those kinds of things make you feel appreciated and feel the work you do is valued," he said. "It would be great for us."

Bringing in Experts

The idea of sharing performance space isn't new. Lincoln Center, Playhouse Square in Cleveland and the Kimel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia are a few of the arts centers that host multiple performing arts companies in one central facility.

But the plan in New Brunswick will extend the collaboration down the line, starting with the stage and continuing to back-of-house operations like costume and scenery shops, educational classrooms, even office space and fax machines.

“Maybe it’s time to move to the softer issues – guilding audiences, fund-raising,” said Janice Price, chief executive of the Kimmel Center. “There’s an economic imperative. We’re all forced to find ways to save money, to be more efficient.”

Price said the New Brunswick initiative was a hot topic at a recent international arts conference in Houston.

Devco has hired Theatre Project Consultants of Connecticut to conduct two studies, one focused on the audience and the other on the member institutions. Devco, which makes its money in development fees for projects around the city, is footing the \$85,000 bill.

Meanwhile, the arts groups themselves are holding monthly meetings to pool ideas and learn more about each other.

“We have to learn how we do things at George Street vis-à-vis how they do things at State or at the Ballet or Crossroads,” said David Saint, artistic director of George Street.

At the same time, Devco has hired Los Angeles-based architect Barton Myers, who designed the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. Myers is waiting for the TPC report, due in May, before he begins his work.

While it’s still early to talk about the outcome, Paladino and others envision knocking down the building that houses the George Street Playhouse and developing a central facility with several performing spaces – an 800-seat theater that can be partitioned into more intimate spaces.

“No risk, no joy,” said Saint. “I feel this is the first step towards something exciting, but it probably won’t be anything like what each of us thought.”