

City considers private management for Hermosa Beach Community Theatre

Michael Hixon Nov 1, 2016



File photo
Hermosa Beach Community Center.

The Hermosa Beach Community Theatre is under utilized and in need of upgrades to make it worthy of professional performances. The city is considering hiring an independent group to program and manage the 502-seat space.

At their Oct. 27 meeting, City Council directed the Community Theatre Subcommittee, featuring commissioners Jani Lange and Robert Rosenfeld of the Parks, Recreation and Community Resources Advisory Commission, to look into the third party management option.

"In being the focus of the arts, it should be engaging broad sectors of the community, not just particular groups but ... the community as a whole," said Rosenfeld at the city council meeting. "If that is the overriding criteria, we had to conclude that's not happening right now, that there's certain specific sections of the community that are being engaged, but the community as a whole is not. So we then considered, how can the theater be operated and managed in such a way that we can make that happen?"

The subcommittee outlined three alternatives, according to Rosenfeld. The city could continue managing the theater, as it has for many years; a local nonprofit with programming and fundraising capabilities could fill that role; or a professional management company could run the theater. The subcommittee and commission chose the professional management option.

"It has the shortest time for implementation, it puts us in a position, if we would implement it, where if down the road a nonprofit entity becomes capable of stepping in, we could morph over to that," Rosenfeld said. "The other reason we wanted to look into a private entity to contact with initially is that it gives the most flexibility in a financial sense in terms of costs, benefits, capital investment, there were a lot of levers that could be manipulated to get to the right solution."

Kelly Orta, community resources manager, offered an alternative: a hybrid approach where the city and another agency could partner, maybe 50-50, in programming at the theater.

"Staff believes hybrid approach is the best option to ensure the facility remain community and recreational focused, which is the requirement under the deed restrictions of the property when the city bought the property from the school district in 1978," Orta said.

A private organization would have a hard time working with deed restrictions that require the entire center to host community-centric events, according to Orta.

While City Attorney Mike Jenkins and Councilmember Stacey Armato raised some concerns about the city's deed with the school district, Councilmember Carolyn Petty said that was a "non-issue" and she feels the hybrid approach would not work.

"Somehow we structure something with a promoter ... you can do a revenue share or you can do a lease," said Petty, adding that the theater is just one portion of the Community Center. "Easily we would carve out a portion of the lease and it goes back to community serving purposes or part of the revenue share goes back to community purposes and we've met the deed restrictions."

Councilmember Jeff Duclos said the city's vision of the theater when they took over in 1978 was that it would become a performing arts center.

"We're clearly not that and about 80 percent of our rentals ... are theater companies and groups," Duclos said. "How do we reconcile that with this other vision that we haven't ... fulfilled?"

Duclos said that, even with a new projector, intercom, speaker and microphone systems, the theater is not up to professional standards. There is no orchestra pit, dressing rooms or proper storage. Significant improvements need to be made, according to Rosenfeld, including ADA compliant seating; the roof is in need of significant maintenance; windows in need of maintenance; inadequate air conditioning and plumbing; and other renovations including carpeting, curtains and floors.

"We just want a first class facility where they'll have an enriching experience from the amenities to the production," Duclos said. "My concern is that there are elements of the arts that will never play there."

So, how will renovations be funded? The space could be leased to a private entity. Or, sponsorship of the theater could be a serious option, added Mayor Hany Fangary.

"The city is ultimately responsible for the building envelope and the furnishes and equipment," said Rosenfeld.

An overriding consensus of the City Council, staff and the subcommittee is that even if managed by a third party, theater programming should be community driven. According to Rosenfeld's calculations, there are 361 days of theater time available. Of those days, 165 are booked at the theater, with 109 days being of "substantial community benefit." Of the 157 weekend days, Friday through Sunday, only 60 percent are booked.

Craig Greeley, owner of Family Theatre, Inc., said the city needs to consider its long relationship with its renters, including Greeley, who has rented for 10 years. At the Oct. 27 city council meeting he said he's against third party outsourcing because he feels it "takes away from the city and the community" where he makes his home.

"There's so much time available right now, let's see what you can do ... book it, rent it, there's open dates," Greeley said. "That's the unique thing about this venue, it's booked 100 percent by our community."

Greeley added, "You're taking the programming from the community and handing it to someone else who's going to be the arbiter of what is good taste or high quality."

Mayor Pro Tem Justin Massey, who supports the subcommittee's proposal, said he values the existing programs at the theater, but agrees with the commission that they need to engage with broader groups locally and regionally.

"I think the large part of the challenge we've had in filling the seats with programming ... is a lack of consistency with the programming," Massey said. "When you have festivals coming and going because they can't get a foothold ... people don't think of the community as a place to go for movies, concerts, comedy shows, whatever the case may be. It's just too sporadic in terms of engaging the broader community. I hope that's one thing we can overcome with a professional manager."

Petty added, "There's competition out there ... we need a professional person to come in and evaluate what is the opportunity because if we try to compete with the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center or Cerritos, we're not going to win."

City Council and staff hope to receive feedback from the community at a future town hall meeting.