

Funding vote kills theater renovation

By WAYNE BRYAN Staff Writer

Sunday, February 28, 2010

TRI-LAKES AREA — There is no alternative plan for the city's use of the former Royal Theater in downtown Arkadelphia after the city's board of directors rejected a plan to fund the renovation of the building with part of a \$3.6 million bond issue.

The directors voted 3-2 on Feb. 18 against a motion by Mayor Chuck Hollingshead to give the bond issue its first reading. Only five members voted on the motion, with a vacancy in the Ward 2 post and the absence of Director Anthony Owen.

City Manager Jimmy Bolt said he was caught off guard by the vote.

"We had two meetings with their support on the project," Bolt said. "Without that, I would not have had the bondpeople at the meeting."

In an earlier meeting, the directors had voted 5-2 to authorize bond brokers to seek offers for bids that would allow interest rates to be decided.

There had been a suggestion that an increase of a half cent in the sales tax could fund the project. A change in the local sales-tax rate would require voter approval.

The desire for a movie theater in town has been a major issue for Arkadelphia citizens, said Wesley Kluck, a vice president at Ouachita Baptist University who chairs the organization that developed the Clark County Strategic Community Plan.

"Focus groups and surveys, not only of college students but residents of the entire community, said they would like to be able to see movies here in town," Kluck said.

Finding a way to have a movie house in Arkadelphia is one of the action steps in the city's strategic plan devised in 2007.

Phillip Baldwin, the CEO of Southern Bancorp, spoke to the board of directors in support of the project.

Carrie Roberson, a community development officer for the company that has been involved in the project, has said the city's plan was a move to answer a public request.

The city manager said he viewed the development of a city-managed theater in the same way he would other public services.

"I would think of it as an extension of our parks and recreation department," he said.

The plan taken to the board by the city manager included developing the building into a modern digital movie theater. Operated by the city with one manager and part-time workers, the theater would have been in operation from Thursday through Sunday. Tickets would have been \$6. Bolt said the theater could also have been rented for special events.

Projections were that as many as 27,500 people would attend the theater during the year. If so, ticket sales would mean the theater would be close to breaking even; at worst, it would lose \$12,000 a year.

“We have looked at many business plans for a private operator, but they are not profitable,” Roberson said. “But when the city built a pool, there was no question that the service would turn a profit, but it was something the people wanted.”

After the vote, she said the board’s vote against the funding program was surprising because board members had approved the purchase of the building.

Board member Ann Sanders said she had taken her time to make a decision on the project.

“I have to have time to think about important matters,” she said. “And I thought, why in the world would we want to build a theater downtown in that old building with one screen?”

Sanders said the city paid too much for the old Royal building, and she did not want the city to go deeper into debt for renovations.

“We have too much emphasis in the wrong place,” she said. “Give it back to the bank or sell it,” she said. “There is a buyer for everything.” - wbryan@arkansasonline.com

Tri-Lakes, Pages 129 on 02/28/2010