

# Theatre effort fails by 3-2 vote

By Joe Phelps

Stings Herald

A measure to fund the renovation of the Royal Theatre failed in a 3-2 vote Thursday at the regular meeting of the Arkadelphia City Board of Directors.

After 40 minutes of hearing arguments for and against the renovation of the theater, directors Brenda Hagerich, James Calhoun and Ann Sanders voted "no" to the 25-year, \$3.6 million bond. Mayor Chuck Hollingshead and DeDe Baldwin voted in favor of the issue. Director Anthony Owen was absent for the meeting, and Ward 2 will remain vacant until March 4, when directors will vote on a candidate.

The bonds also would have funded the construction of a new fire station and improvements to the Youth Sports Complex.

Six people spoke in favor of the bonds, with another six speaking out against the bonds.

Dr. Wesley Kluck, chair of the Clark County Strategic Plan, spoke first in favor of the bond issuance. Using a prepared speech, Kluck provided background information on the effort to bring in a theater to Arkadelphia. He also provided statistics which showed that a majority of people surveyed wanted a theater in Arkadelphia, whether it be privately or government-owned.

Of the 887 people recently surveyed (393 college students and 459 Clark County residents), 78 percent said they would like a theater while 21 percent said they would not, Kluck said.

Sixty-four percent said they would be in favor of a city-run theater, while 11 percent opposed it and 18 percent were "neutral" in their opinion.

Sixty-eight percent said they would support the bond, while 18 percent said they would rather have either a sales or A&P tax to fund its operation.

Kluck further broke down the statistics by Clark County residents and college students.

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# LOCAL

## ARKADELPHIA SCHOOL MENU

Monday - Pizza pocket, salad with ranch, fruit cocktail and chocolate pudding

## THEATRE

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Hagerich said there should have been a public hearing "from the get-go ... then move forward. That's our fault. There has been a whole lot happen since the board retreat" in August 2008, when City Manager Jimmy Bolt unveiled the concept of purchasing and renovating the old theater. She said the survey's results should have been given long before the public hearing.

Kluck said he would like to see the results of her survey.

Stuart Thomas, who is currently a stockholder in a firm renovating the plaza on Country Club Road behind Pizza Hut, said he was against having a city-run theater. His reasoning: the firm has spoken with a private investor (whose name he did not release) who is interested in operating a cinema in Arkadelphia.

Thomas added that the city has not "exhausted all the possibilities" to get a private company to run a theater.

Phil Baldwin, chief executive officer of Southern Bancorp, said he was in favor of the city-managed Royal. A 10-year resident of Arkadelphia, he said his family drives to Hot Springs to see movies. "It's a real shame. As

a banker, I have worked with (private) groups" interested in running a theater in Arkadelphia. "And it doesn't work financially."

Noting the condition of the cinemas in Hot Springs, he added that "it doesn't work in Hot Springs, either." He said that, in order for a city to have one or more cinemas be "economically viable," it needs a population of at least 100,000 people.

Calhoun, who initially supported the theater idea until Bolt presented the funding options, said Baldwin's comments "could have been con'instead of pro" because of Arkadelphia's population as well as the public funds it would cost to run the Royal. Even using franchise fees and taxes, he said, it would lose \$12,000 per year. "It could lose way more than that," he added. "Where would this money come from?" He said he was "intrigued" by Thomas' comments about having a private company own a cinema. "I can't, in good conscience, vote" in favor of the bonds, he said, "knowing that (the city's) revenue was down in December" and other financial aspects.

Another man spoke out against the bonds because "we can't risk putting city dollars into a one-screen theater at this time."

Sanders, referring to an article published by the

Henderson State University Oracle, said she made up her mind after reading the article. In it, Kluck was quoted as saying Sanders could not make up her mind about the issue. "This article helped me make up my mind," Sanders said. "And I'm going to use it against you." Sanders attacked Kluck and Bolt about their comments about her in the article.

Lauren Land, a Ouachita Baptist University employee, said she was in favor of the bond issuance because she has spoken with "hundreds of (OBU) students" who are excited about the prospect of having a theater, "especially students without a means of transportation and who live on campus. She said she was speaking on behalf of the thousands of college students in Arkadelphia who want a theater.

The parent of a teenager said that, when she heard of the theater idea, "I was excited at the prospect" because her children are now able to drive. "I would much rather see them stay home than drive to Hot Springs," she said, adding that Clark County would be "losing dollars ... It's more than just ticket sales. It's potential growth for our city."

Connie Nelson, executive director of the Arkadelphia Area Chamber of Commerce, said the Royal "de-

serves an opportunity" and that the City Board should "take the chance and risk — not just for the kids," but for everyone else in the community. "I don't think anyone has the answers, but what are we going to do? Walk away from a moving train headed in the direction of a thriving community?" She said the project would be "for the betterment of our community" and that she hears "more positives than negatives" about the issue.

Jonathan Huber, a justice of the peace, said he was against a city-run theater. He suggested the city spend the money to build a spec building that could be leased to a private company for \$1 per year as incentive. He said that would cost "the same amount of money than to renovate" the Royal.

Hollingshead said the first thing he heard from constituents when he was elected mayor 11 years ago was: "We need a theater." He said the elderly women with whom he spoke urged him to find a way to get a theater before they were too old to go to see a movie. And now, since those women are too old, "I owe them an apology."

He said the city has spoken with about 10 private prospects about a theater, but their business plan would not be profitable in Arkadelphia. He added that many spoke out against the

city-run Aquatic Park because, they said, the city shouldn't be in "the swimming pool business." Also, he added, people spoke out against the city-run Recreation Center when it was an issue.

Hollingshead entered a motion to place the bond issue on its first reading. DeDe Baldwin seconded his motion, but it failed, with only Hollingshead and Baldwin voting "yes" to the bond issuance.

Directors then unanimously voted to extend the financing of the Print Mania building, which was purchased by a 6-1 vote last February (Calhoun voted

"no" because of a gap in appraisal amounts). The note was due March 31.

The loan amount due is \$236,500 plus \$8,393 interest. The total amount due, \$244,893, will be financed by Southern Financial Partners at a fixed simple interest rate of 3.5 percent, and is due by March 31, 2011.

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