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Drayton plans unveiled

Ray Martin, Times Staff

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Cambridge got its first peek today at what the new \$14- million theatre complex is going to look like.

During a press conference at Cambridge City Hall, the project's four partners – the city, Drayton Entertainment, federal and provincial governments – unveiled plans and talked about the project.

"This is all about bringing balance to the community," said Mayor Doug Craig.

"For years, facilities for the arts were lacking in Cambridge. With this project and others, the arts needs are being met."

For Alex Mustakas, Drayton Entertainment's artistic director, the event was a chance to show off and promote the new facility, as well as a chance to set the record straight.

"I can't believe the amount of misinformation that has popped up around this project. In the last few weeks, I feel like I've taken a beating and I'm not sure why," he said.

Although there has been some opposition to the project for more than a year, criticism peaked during the 2011 city budget talks.

Questions have been raised about the project's construction tender, which was awarded to Melloul-Blamey. At one city budget meeting, businessman Gord Hobbs said an executive member of the construction company sits on Drayton's board of directors.

"We are a non-profit charitable organization, why would we put our status at risk like that," Mustakas said.

"We've been as fair and transparent as possible. We've done everything that is required of us."

According to a press release, a request for proposals was issued through MERX, a leading electronic-tendering service. Six Ontario-based companies bid on the project and the winner Melloul-Blamey was selected according to guidelines set out by the three levels of government.

Hobbs had also expressed concern that the city could be "creating a white elephant" as many arts facilities end up operating in the red and require significant government assistance.

"You have to remember the city approached us after studying our business model. We didn't seek this out," Mustakas said.

"They liked our model of sustainability and we eventually formed a partnership."

Drayton Entertainment, a non-profit charitable organization, is one of Canada's most successful professional theatre companies presenting to some 200,000 patrons each year at its six theatres in four Ontario communities.

Mustakas admits that the recession has hit the arts community hard, but ticket sales this year indicate that Drayton and the rest of the industry are starting to bounce back.

As for the project itself, Mustakas said it will be a modern design incorporating glass, brick and possibly a stone structure, which will fit in with the surrounding area.

"We wanted a design that will show people what's going on and bring them into the building," he said.

The new 59,000-square-foot facility will be two-storeys and cost an estimated \$14 million. The city is contributing \$6 million to the project and will own the building. Last year, the city paid \$900,000 for design work and this year will debenture \$5.1 million to pay its share of construction costs.

Drayton Entertainment will manage the facility. While Drayton will stage a full slate of performances in the new theatre, time will also be made available for use by community groups.

The new theatre will be built on the municipal parking lot at the corner of Grand Avenue and St. Andrews Street. It will house a 500-seat theatre, as well as administration offices, production and support facilities for Drayton Entertainment.

The total project cost is \$20.9 million, which also includes technical upgrades to several of Drayton Entertainment's six existing Ontario venues.

The theatre is expected to be complete in late summer, 2012.

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