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Drawings for Cambridge theatre plan unveiled by politicians and Drayton Entertainment

By Kevin Swayze, Record staff

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CAMBRIDGE - Curtains rose Friday on plans for a 500-seat, city-owned theatre on Grand Avenue at St. Andrew's Street.

Architectural drawings were unveiled by politicians and officials from Drayton Entertainment, which intends the \$14-million building to become its headquarters.

Drayton promises to operate the facility with no taxpayer subsidy, and make the building available for use by community and business groups when plays and musicals aren't on stage.

"It's going to be a cultural hub, an economic stimulus, a social hub for the whole area," Alex Mustakas, Drayton's artistic director, said before the public information session in the Cambridge Centre for the Arts.

Not everyone among the 100 people gathered for the feel-good session was happy about the theatre.

As Mayor Doug Craig ended the presentation, a woman yelled from the back of the room. She said she was a disgusted taxpayer who couldn't afford such a project.

Then she quickly left through a side door.

The federal, provincial and Cambridge governments contributed \$6 million each toward a \$21-million renovation program at six existing Drayton theatres — and to help build a new home for Drayton Entertainment in Cambridge.

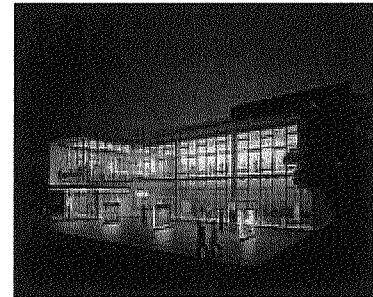
The remaining \$3 million must be raised by Drayton patrons. They've already pledged \$600,000 before the campaign officially starts, Mustakas said.

Construction is expected to start by summer, with the building staging plays by fall 2012.

Cambridge also contributed a parking lot on Grand Avenue to the theatre project. Last year, the city set aside \$900,000 towards design of the theatre, and plans to borrow \$5.1 million in 2012 to make up the balance of its share.

Cambridge MP Gary Goodyear said Drayton has a history making money on theatre shows and drawing thousands of people to the towns where they stage shows. According to the plan, public investment will quickly be recovered in taxes as the Cambridge theatre creates \$80 million in annual economic spin-off in Cambridge.

"It's huge," said Greg Durocher, general manager of the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce.



When the project is finished by late 2012, Drayton Entertainment's Cambridge theatre and administrative centre should look like this from the street.

"There isn't an entertainment district, with professional theatre in it, that doesn't reap economic benefits."

The working name for the complex is the Cambridge Performing Arts Centre, but Mustakas is wary about confusion with the city's Cambridge Arts Centre on Wellington Street. He is looking to sell naming rights to raise money for the project.

The front of the three-storey building will be covered in glass, inviting people to look in and see theatrical and community activities. "It will glow at night," Mustakas said.

It will be the flagship venue for Drayton plays and musicals. Drayton's administrative headquarters will move to Cambridge from the town of Drayton, where the organization was founded 20 years ago.

Drayton is a registered charity which works in partnership with governments, Mustakas said. The company has never asked for any money to cover day-to-day operations in the public buildings it uses, and never will, Mustakas said.

In return, surrounding businesses benefit from theatre-goers making incidental purchases.

The theatre for Drayton won't alone solve the economic ills for downtown Cambridge, said Coun. Ben Tucci. It will give surrounding business owners an opportunity they must be ready to exploit.

To help cover the costs of running the Cambridge complex, stage and meeting rooms will be rented out for other performances, and to non-profit agencies and business groups needing space.

To start, about half of the year will be booked for Drayton shows, with the rest of the time available for rental, Mustakas said.

Drayton's ticket sales dipped a little in 2010 as the recession hit last year, but advance sales for the 2011 season are back to normal, Mustakas said.

There are about 1,000 Drayton ticket buyers in Cambridge. Mustakas sees a market to be tapped.

About 30 full-time employees will use a block of offices in the building for administration, promotion and wardrobe-and-prop creation. In the spring-to-fall show season, as many as 100 temporary workers — including actors, ushers and ticket sales staff — will work on Grand Avenue.

The third floor will be dormitory space for dozens of actors, all of whom will be looking to buy food and services in the surrounding area, Mustakas said.

Drayton places advertisements in its playbills looking for billets for actors. Even though there will be dorms in Cambridge, he expects an ongoing need for accommodation in the community.

Originally, Drayton's workshops and set-storage — now spread across four locations in southwestern Ontario — were intended to be part of the new Cambridge building. There wasn't room.

Another location will be found in Cambridge for that part of the operation, Mustakas said.

While the public face of the building will be modern and high quality, Mustakas said the hidden production space will be bare bones to keep costs down. "There will be lots of concrete block walls."

Even so, Mustakas expects opportunities to rent the five rehearsal halls for community use.

He's convinced there won't be any trouble filling the building with community and corporate events when Drayton isn't staging shows.

That has been the experience at the St. Jacobs Country Playhouse on the Waterloo border, where there are only a few nights of the year when the building goes unused.

Already, 12,000-13,000 teens annually attend special youth shows at Drayton theatres. Mustakas wants that to grow, while encouraging more young people to think about theatre as a career.

"We finally have room for a youth program," he said. "We've wanted to have a young company."

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