The $7 Million Question

Means Of Funding Proposed Amphitheater Still Uncertain

By Jeff Mellott

HARRISONBURG - Fundraising activities to support a proposed $7.5 million amphitheater project remained vague on Thursday.

David Miller, who has proposed the project to the city on behalf of the Harrisonburg Downtown Dining Alliance and Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, outlined some general fundraising methods but did not commit to an overall strategy.

The fundraising would support the construction of a 3,000- to 5,000-seat amphitheater in a parklike setting on the municipal parking lot on South Liberty Street, Miller said on Thursday.

Proposal

On Tuesday, Miller had told Harrisonburg City Council that the proposed amphitheater's capacity would be between 5,000 and 7,000.

On Thursday, Miller said he meant to say that the entire developed area of the parking lot, including the Harrisonburg Farmers Market, should be able to hold about 7,000 people for events, but that the amphitheater itself would hold closer to an average of 4,000.

The proposal calls for placing the amphitheater next to Turner Pavilion, home of the farmers market.
Under the proposal, the city-owned grassy area along South Liberty Street would be converted into parking. The plan also calls for the city to purchase two properties south of Warren Street for additional parking.

Miller said he has an option to buy the properties for $410,000.

The city would make the purchase only after amphitheater backers raised $7 million in private funds, according to Miller.

The proposal is contingent on the city agreeing to pay up to $90,000 for a feasibility study.

The concept also calls for the city to lease the property to the alliance, which could employ an agent to manage the amphitheater, Miller has said.

The city has a similar arrangement with the farmers market, in which it owns Turner Pavilion and leases it to the market.

Miller's request for the city to pay for a feasibility study was tabled Tuesday, with council delaying action for at least two weeks.

Miller had few specifics about how the $7 million in private funds would be raised, though he did say a variety of methods are being considered, including a website where visitors could make contributions.

Fundraising efforts might include placing the names of donors on limestone pavers planned for the project, he said.

He also raised the possibility of seeking grants.

The alliance would take the lead in the fundraising effort, Miller said.

"If the community wants it bad enough, we can make it happen," he said.

**Public Reaction**

The public's reaction to the amphitheater proposal has so far been mixed.

Councilman Charles Chenault says residents he's heard from have been supportive of a smaller venue than the 7,000-seat amphitheater presented to council earlier this week.

Those who live just east of downtown have raised concerns about concert noise, Chenault said.

But Councilman David Wiens said the reaction he's heard has been supportive.

Some residents have asked why the city is delaying its decision on the feasibility study, Wiens said.

The possibility of the amphitheater becoming a neighbor to the rear of the Virginia Quilt Museum does not concern Judith Shuey, the director.

Adequate parking would be one challenge the amphitheater would create for the museum, but that would depend on the final plan, Shuey said.

But city attractions are important, she added.

"The more viable your downtown, the more viable your community," Shuey said.
Project Development

The idea of an amphitheater for Harrisonburg is not new. The concept has been bandied about for years.

This year's proposal began to take shape in January.

During that month, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance developed its strategic goals for the year, which included the development of a downtown music venue.

After the success of the Rocktown Beer & Music Festival held April 23 at the municipal lot, Miller asked alliance members if they had interest in a downtown amphitheater.

The alliance is an incorporated organization of 29 members that own establishments related to the hospitality industry. The group's goal is to make the downtown a dining destination.

On June 9, a quorum of the alliance's five-member board of directors approved backing a proposal to develop an amphitheater on city property.

Revenue

Council members want questions about the project, including its economic viability, answered before they commit to anything.

During his presentation to council, Miller said the amphitheater would increase tax revenues.

Based on the increased business created by the Rocktown festival, Miller estimates that the city would realize about $100,000 in additional tax revenue annually.

To arrive at that figure, Miller multiplied the estimated $5,000 in tax revenues produced by the festival by 20 potential events that could be held at the amphitheater.

Council members remain a bit skeptical of the project's possible effect on tax revenue.

"I am not sure that is a fair comparison," Wiens said.

Mayor Richard Baugh agreed. "We need some more evidence that is true."

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