

The Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall Can and Must Be Saved

by Tony Souza

I am a career historic preservation professional who has successfully led numerous projects to designate, and obtain substantial federal tax benefits for, both National Register Historic Places and entire National Historic Districts. Many of my projects have won national awards, and one, New Bedford's Whaling District, was named a National Historic Park. In my adopted Sarasota community, I have continued my preservation work, and currently serve as Chairman of Sarasota County's Historic Preservation Board and as a board member of Sarasota City Historic Preservation Board and of The Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation ("SAHP").

In my view, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall is Sarasota's number one signature architectural landmark building. It has the requisite age, integrity and significance to meet all essential qualifications for its listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The Hall's listing on the National Register will bring it the undeniable recognition it deserves for its architectural distinction and historic contributions to Sarasota's cultural life of. The listing will also bring substantial tangible benefits that will help support the Hall's preservation.

First, National Register listing would provide an effective exemption from FEMA's so-called 50% rule that would otherwise limit the scale of investment in substantial renovations of the Hall. Second, National Register designation would help qualify the building for the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program, which would effectively pay for about one-fifth of any rehabilitation expense for the Hall's preservation. That incentive program provides a tax credit equivalent to 20% of the qualifying expenses of renovations and that tax credit is readily marketable for the purchase of tax paying entities.

In this light, the Sarasota City Commission must be urged to approve advancing an application for listing of the Hall in the National Register of Historic Places as soon as possible. Though the application process is multi-layered and complex, involving city, state and federal agencies, it could be handled most efficiently and expertly by the Commission

assigning handling of the process to our community's oldest and largest historic preservation organization, the Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation. That organization has the essential experience and the volunteer expertise it can mobilize to manage and complete the application process and to procure the related benefits when they are needed.

Age and Significance of the Building:

The Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall was constructed in 1968, one of the first performing arts halls built by any city in Florida, and even in the entire U.S. It opened its first season of programs in January 1970 with a run of "Fiddler on the Roof". With over 52 years of successful operation under city led management, the Hall continues its extraordinary record of successful service as an indispensable venue and catalyst for the performing arts in the Sarasota region, focused on its traditional line-up of Broadway shows and headlining musicians, dancers and comedians.

The building of a performing arts hall was originally spurred by an extraordinarily visionary and generous gift of \$400,000 by local philanthropists Lewis and Eugenia Van Wezel. The City of Sarasota Commission of those days unanimously approved funding the balance of construction costs to enable the Hall to be built.

The Hall's unique purple, seashell shaped building is an iconic architectural landmark of Sarasota. It was designed by architect William Wesley Peters, the son-in-law, principal protégé, and the Frank Lloyd Wright's successor head of architectural firm, Taliesin Associates. It is celebrated by architectural historians and critics as a stunning example of the Frank Lloyd Wright school of public building architecture.

Integrity of the Building

The Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall has been owned, operated and maintained by Sarasota city's administration as a successful performing arts venue since its opening over 52 years ago. The building was designed and built by Taliesin Associates to endure as a landmark performing arts venue for Sarasota, and it has endured, without any internal structural failure or significant external damage. The city and local philanthropic interests have invested tens of millions of dollars over the years, including a major renovation in 2000, and periodic upgrading of sound, lighting, acoustic and other facilities, to keep the Hall operating and viable for hosting its traditional, year-round lineup of performances. None of the improvements have altered the integrity of the original architectural design or structure of the building.

The city has no plans to suspend its programming and operation of the Hall, unless and until a replacement hall has been built and opened. In fact, the city continues to book shows for future seasons and has clearly determined that the Hall can continue to operate and welcome paying guests safely for at least another 5-6-7 years, until a new hall is built to replace it. If the city expects the Hall to endure structurally and functionally for that long, why can't it endure for another several decades?

Within 5-7 years, all the Hall's legacy rights users, such as the Sarasota Orchestra and the Sarasota Concert Association, will have moved their programs to the complex the Sarasota Orchestra is now planning to build near I-75 on Fruitville Avenue, and the programming calendar of the Hall will be freed to operate on an optimal economic basis.