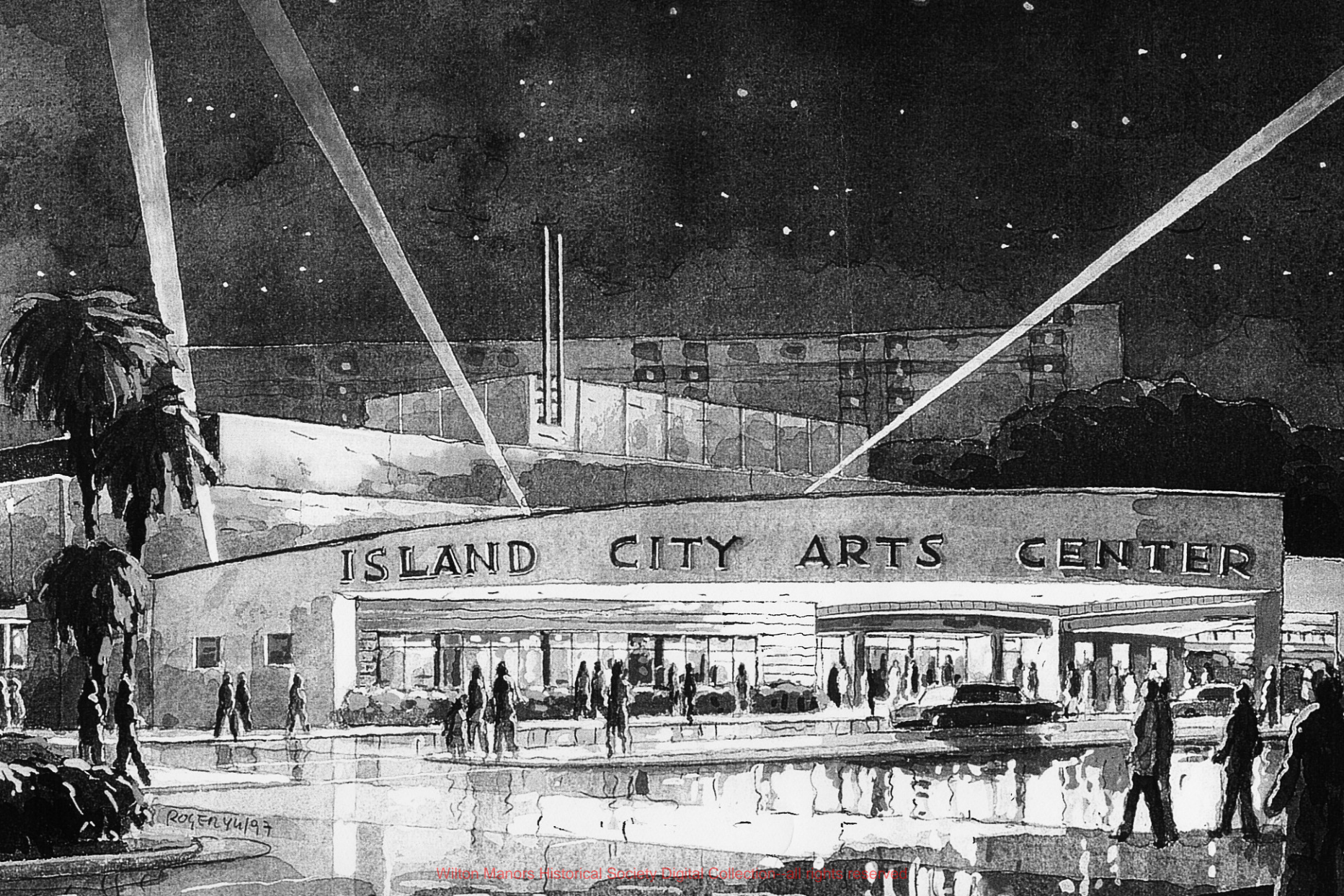


ISLAND CITY ARTS CENTER

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ISLAND CITY ARTS CENTER

ROGER YU/97

Theater stages approval

By JENNIFER HEIT

SPECIAL TO THE SUN-SENTINEL

WILTON MANORS — A dramatic proposal to turn a city building into a theater and arts complex is inching closer to reality.

Wilton Manors has earned a place on the short list among applicants seeking state grants for cultural affairs projects.

If awarded, the city would receive \$750,000 to help renovate the long-vacant 2020 building on Wilton Drive.

"It's a wonderful surprise," said City Council member Rich Pratt. "I didn't think we were going to get a shot at it."

The state's Arts Council has already approved the grant application, which historically indicates that funding is likely to go through, said Assistant City Manager Dan Keefe.

State legislators would be required

A proposed arts center is closer to getting \$750,000 from the state.

to give final approval during their next session beginning in March in Tallahassee.

Tentatively called the Island City Arts Center for Education — or Island City ACE for short — the project is the focus of a plan to pump life into sleepy Wilton Drive, now defined by vacant storefronts and little passing traffic.

Preliminary plans drafted by outside consultant Richard Rubin have included an art gallery and restaurant within the theater complex.

If the state grant is approved, about \$1 million more would be needed for the roughly \$2.1 million estimated project.

Having \$1 million nearly secured makes the project appear financially stable before would-be philanthropists, Keefe said.

"Those looking to donate will feel that it's going to happen," the assistant city manager said.

Plans call for the nonprofit Fort Lauderdale Players and the Fort Lauderdale Children's Theatre to receive a 20-year lease from the city with two 10-year extensions, said Michael McCord, artistic director of the Fort Lauderdale Players.

Details are being formalized now,
MORE GRANT ON PAGE 4

NEWS

Manors to spur revival

PROPOSED ORDINANCE ENCOURAGES ART SCENE

By JENNIFER HEIT

SPECIAL TO THE SUN-SENTINEL

WILTON MANORS — The prospect of a vibrant and thriving downtown has eluded business owners and city officials for years. They all have wondered how to revitalize sleepy Wilton Drive.

Except for a few restaurants and bars, most businesses along the city's main street close at 5 p.m.

To spur redevelopment, the city is in the planning stages of developing an ordinance that will encourage private businesses to transform Wilton Drive into an arts and entertainment district.

"One of the things the city can do is not stand in the way," said Harold Horne, Community Services Director.

Horne is drafting an ordinance that will be reviewed by the Planning & Zoning Board on Monday. If approved, the measure would then head to the City Council, perhaps as early as February, for consideration.

With the city-owned 2020 building scheduled to become a theater complex, city officials want art galleries, nightclubs and upscale restaurants to complement the new facility.

The new zoning would extend along Wilton Drive from the city's southern boundary north to Five Points. Under a current proposal, such businesses would be permitted to serve alcohol, relaxing a 1,000-foot distance requirement that now prevents them from locating too close to each other.

City Manager Bob Levy said the city often receives calls from establishments looking to relocate in Wilton Manors.

"The problem is we have to say 'no,'" he said.

Only businesses that can show that selling alcohol is a secondary function — such as a restaurant serving food — may be exempt under a special rule.

One option would be to allow restaurants to open on Wilton Drive without an exception. A second alternative also would extend that right to bars.

In some ways, Horne said, Wilton Manors is fortunate. Unlike many cities in the county, it has a main street with which people identify the town.

"Wilton Drive is one of the few places in Broward County that has that hometown, downtown feeling," he said.

Developing an arts and entertainment district is an idea being applauded by Dominick Speziale, who opened the English pub Shakespeare's on Northeast 26th Street in the early 1990s.

MORE DOWNTOWN ON PAGE 8

TO BE OR NOT TO BE IN MANORS? FINANCIAL CONCERNS MAY CLOSE CURTAIN ON ARTS CENTER PLAN

[EAST BROWARD Edition]

Sun Sentinel - Fort Lauderdale

Author: JENNIFER HEIT Special to the Sun-Sentinel

Date: Nov 16, 1997

Start Page: 3

Section: COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP

Text Word Count: 835

Document Text

It has been touted as the building block needed to revamp Wilton Drive, but so far the proposed Island City Arts Center has met with nothing but stumbling blocks.

Two years after plans to develop the vacant 2020 Building were announced, shaky financing continues to stall groundbreaking.

Meanwhile, the Fort Lauderdale Players, one of two cultural groups expected to occupy the theater and raise money for its construction, recently backed out of the deal because of financial concerns.

And former City Manager Bob Levy, who came up with the plan, has left the city to return to his old job as town administrator of Pembroke Park. In the wake of growing criticism, interim Manager Dan Keefe is expected to take a more fiscally conservative approach to the project.

"We have to be realistic in saying, 'here's the funding; here's what we need to go,' " Keefe said. "We need assurances that will happen before we commit."

The issue could turn up on a public referendum, along with other proposed improvements, during the upcoming March election. That race could result in a new mayor and two new council members, who may or may not favor the estimated \$3.8 million project, a price tag many complain is too costly for cash-strapped Wilton Manors.

"Where is the justification to go ahead and subsidize something that they think will promote a certain course or good?" said Fort Lauderdale resident Bob Helmholtz, former president of the Wilton Manors Business Association, of the project's dependence on taxpayer dollars.

Joanne Fanizza, president of the Tropical Pines Civic Association, says the theater would be a "nice project if the city had no other critical needs."

Funds would be better spent on programs to renovate the deteriorating storefronts that make the drive an eyesore, she said.

"There's no way the theater would revitalize the area," she said. "That's the big fallacy of thinking that if we pour all our resources into the 2020 building, everything else will follow."

But the notion that a theater would attract businesses to the street has not been disproved.

The theater's future presence has been used for the past two years to draw restaurants, clubs and shops to the image-hungry street.

It drew Rick Carlone of Art Showcase to set up his art gallery on the drive last spring.

"It was a big influence. I'm disappointed about where the theater's at because I don't know where it's at," he said.

Anticipating the theater's arrival, the Shoppes of Wilton Manors has gone from drab to an eye-catching Mediterranean green and yellow decor.

A large Fort Lauderdale law firm, Cooney, Mattson, Lance, Blackburn, Richards and O'Connor, is leaving Las Olas

Boulevard for the promising potential of the drive. The law firm has planned to adopt the Mediterranean theme for its office building.

Bob Trescott of Florida Mainstreet, a state-sponsored program that seeks to revamp blighted downtowns, said such cultural projects demand wide community support backed by private sector dollars if they are to work.

Demographic and economic studies conducted in the affected area are essential to predict a proposal's success, he said.

"It has to be based on something that's real," said Trescott, a coordinator for Mainstreet's grassroots program. "That's not just somebody's dream."

The 50-year old Fort Lauderdale Children's Theatre, which intends to occupy the completed facility, expects to raise \$1 million by April 1998. They're also searching for a second cultural group to take the Players' place.

"It's important, of course, but it's not imperative," said Carole Ries, executive director of the theater, referring to the need for a partner. "We're going on the assumption that the Children's Theatre will have to do it all."

Council Member Gloria O'Gorman believes the Children's Theater is the key to the project.

"If they can't figure out how to finance it, it's not going to happen," she said.

So far grants are expected to pay about \$1.4 million of the theater's costs, Keefe said. The not-for-profit Island City Foundation set up by council members last summer has a goal to raise \$2 million from private agencies.

"I have no doubt that it's fully realistic and it will be achieved," said Council Member Rich Pratt, who said he is less certain about the project's timetable.

So far the Children's Theatre has raised about \$170,000, Ries said. It lost only about \$5,000 when the Players backed out.

Under state grant requirements, the city must put up \$1 million in matching funds by August 1998. That money can come from private donations, county grants, budget funds, and money raised by the childrens' theater.

But if the theater plan falls through, the city would be required to return the grant funds, possibly at the expense of losing out on future state dollars, Keefe said.

Keefe said council members could decide to put the issue to a referendum by asking voters if the city should put up a share of the needed funds.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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NEW COUNCIL RE-EXAMINES OLD ISSUES ARTS CENTER AND PARKS ARE UP FOR DISCUSSION

[EAST BROWARD Edition]

Sun Sentinel - Fort Lauderdale

Author: LISA J. HURIASH Staff Writer

Date: Apr 8, 1998

Start Page: 3

Section: COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP

Text Word Count: 844

Document Text

With two new members and a new mayor, the Wilton Manors City Council is looking at some old issues from a new perspective.

Since the March 10 election, the council has asked for a workshop to re-examine the feasibility of building the Island City Arts Center, continued to look into adding parks and said it wants to take another look at prohibiting pawn shops and certain other businesses from opening on Wilton Drive.

And there is already a change in the conduct of the meetings.

Jack Seiler, newly elected mayor and a council member since 1993, said his first priority is increasing public participation. He lifted the old three-minute time limit on residents who speak at meetings and added time for more public comment at the end of each meeting.

Seiler defeated King Wilkinson, the two-term mayor, in last month's election. Two new council members were elected as well: Gary Resnick, a community relations director for MediaOne, and Joanne Fanizza, a civil litigation attorney. They won the seats previously held by Seiler and Gloria O'Gorman, who lost her re-election bid.

Voters can expect attention to the following issues, city leaders say:

* The proposed Island City Arts Center. The vacant 2020 Building still does not have a financing plan, but the estimated cost of \$3.8 million to turn it into a theater is too steep for many people.

"I just want to see it work with no further expense to the taxpayers of Wilton Manors," Seiler said. "It's time for the private sector to step up. . . . I don't want it to come out of the taxes."

The council this month plans to schedule a workshop on the center.

* Focus on redevelopment. "I'd like to have a workshop devoted to redevelopment. It's one of my priorities," Fanizza said.

Some of the businesses on Wilton Drive, the commercial heart of the city, are rundown. Some shops and offices are vacant. City leaders want to attract more businesses. The arts center is supposed to be one of the anchors of a revitalized downtown.

* Prohibiting pawn shops, used car lots, check-cashing stores and certain other businesses from operating along Wilton Drive, designated an arts and entertainment district. Commissioners talked about such an ordinance before the March election but took no action. With the new membership, commissioners said last month they want to revisit the issue.

* Adding more parks. There has been an on-and-off debate about asking voters to pay for more parks, perhaps through a bond measure. At one point late last year, supporters were calling for a referendum this year. That question has not been resolved, but one of the opponents of more parks was Wilkinson, who is now off the council.

* A new city manager. Dan Keefe, the assistant city manager, has served as interim administrator since November, when former manager Bob Levy left. Commissioners have not decided whether to give Keefe the job permanently or look for someone else.

Last month's election brought one other issue to the forefront: The political clout of Wilton Manors' growing gay community.

In the 1996 election, several candidates said Wilkinson made disparaging comments about gays in Wilton Manors. Harold Horne, the city's community service director, also said Wilkinson had asked him to help keep gay-owned businesses off Wilton Drive.

Wilkinson denied both accusations, but they were widely circulated during the campaign. They became such an issue that Wilkinson held a last-ditch peacemaking session with the gay community in an effort to convince people he is not anti-gay.

Wilkinson was voted out by a 2-1 margin.

Some leaders of the gay community say it was their voice that made the difference in this election.

"Without a doubt," said Bill Salicco, president of the Dolphin Democratic Club, a gay and lesbian political group.

"I was out all that day and I saw who was coming to the polls," he said. "It was definitely the gay community. There was no other issue for them to come out. We drove the message out hard and clear."

Keith Watts, vice president of the Dolphin Democratic Club and a business owner in Wilton Manors, agrees.

"King had made those remarks about the community," Watts said. "He wanted them off of Wilton Drive, he wanted them out of Wilton Manors. We phone-banked and walked door to door. We did everything to make sure the gays and lesbians came out to vote."

The Dolphin Democratic Club estimates there are about 32 known gay-owned businesses in the city, up from four only 10 years ago. The city of 12,000 people also has also more than 2,500 gay residents, the organization estimates.

Wilkinson did not return several telephone calls.

Some of the public said they just wanted new blood. "He's been in twice," said Alice Annesi of Wilkinson. "I'd like to see someone else get in, possibly with new ideas."

The top fund-raisers were also the winners: Seiler raised \$10,665 and Wilkinson raised \$5,550. Fanizza raised \$6,135 and Resnick raised \$5,261. O'Gorman raised only \$2,380 _ more than the other losing challengers.

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ARTS CENTER PLANS IN CRUNCH \$600,000 NEEDED BY OCTOBER

[EAST BROWARD Edition]

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Author: JENNIFER HEIT Special to the Sun-Sentinel

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Start Page: 3

Section: COMMUNITY CLOSE-UP

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Document Text

Whether an arts center will be built on Wilton Drive has come down to a question of how many people want it and how much they'll pay to make it happen.

In an effort to speed the project's fund-raising efforts, council members have set a goal of \$600,000 in private dollars by October. If the deadline is not met, they will consider scrapping plans to build the Island City Arts Center.

"I'd like to see some of the people who were so gung ho come and back this thing," said Mayor Jack Seiler. "If we don't raise enough money, we're going to have to sit down and consider if this is a viable project."

This latest deadline comes two years after the idea of a theater to revive Wilton Drive was heralded by city officials and merchants as a great one.

So far more than \$1.5 million in state and county funding has been allocated for the estimated \$3.8 million project. An additional \$2.3 million is needed to complete the project.

Conceptual plans show a gleaming center for children's plays, theater classes and art displays.

The building would be leased by the Fort Lauderdale Children's Theatre, which wants to move from its location at 640 N. Andrews Ave. The nonprofit group says it has \$140,000 in pledges from its own fund-raising campaign, and is on the verge of securing a major contributor.

"It's getting that first gift that's difficult because people have to believe a project will happen," said Carole Ries, executive director of Children's Theatre. "We still believe the project is a viable option."

For now, the long-vacant 2020 building is plagued with electrical, roofing and plumbing problems. The money would go toward gutting the structure and bringing it up to code.

Council members say they want the plan to become a reality.

"Truthfully, a cultural center like that would be a phenomenal move," said Councilwoman Joanne Fanizza, who has in the past criticized the project's flimsy financial backing. "I foresee us trying everything possible to get this project moving."

The Island City Foundation, a fund-raising agency created by the city about a year ago for the theater, has submitted requests to 20 major corporations in the Broward County area to fund the project.

Among the prospects are the Publix supermarket chain, Eckerd Drugs, Motorola, American Express and Suntrust Bank.

"We've tried to cultivate connections," said Dan Keefe, acting city manager. "If there's resistance, it's not over the facility. It's because they (potential contributors) want to finance programming."

Although there is enough money to begin work, the city has delayed a groundbreaking until it can guarantee the project will be finished.

"The problem is we're in a huge budget crunch," Fanizza said. "We're not in a position to finance the project."

Ries says she knew all along the theater could not depend on taxpayer dollars.

"If I'm disappointed in anything, it's that I would have expected more of the business owners and residents of Wilton Manors to use their influence to get donors. It's for the improvement of their city."

In the past two years Wilton Drive has been gentrified, with few vacancies now available and rents higher than what they were four years ago.

With or without the theater, city officials and merchants say the trend will continue.

But Anthony Fiorelli, of Fiorelli For Flowers, says the theater would help bring a wider mix of people to the drive so that it wouldn't become typecast. Many of the businesses are gay-owned.

"I don't want us to be a gay resort," said Fiorelli, who is gay. "I'd like to see mothers walking children down the street. It keeps that family, small-town feeling."

He says it's tough for small business owners to write large checks for the project.

Instead, merchants along the drive have been waiting to see to what will happen next.

"I look outside my window and see an ugly brown and gray building," Fiorelli said. "I'd be really disappointed if the theater didn't make it."

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