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County, city OK grants for Power House Theatre

Andy Porter and Forrest Holt

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Herb Alpert and Lani Hall play to a sold-out crowd at the GESA Power House Theatre Sunday evening. 7-30-17 Lehman Photo GREG LEHMAN

This story has been modified since its initial publication to reflect a correction.

City and county leaders have voted to support Gesa Power House Theatre with a combined \$55,000 in donations this year to help the theater transition into a nonprofit organization.

Walla Walla County commissioners Tuesday approved a \$30,000 donation to the Gesa Power House Theatre. And Walla Walla City Council members, at their meeting last week, approved \$25,000 for the theater.

Commissioners split 2-1 on the vote for the donation from the county's Community Outreach Fund with Commissioners Todd Kimball and Jim Johnson voting "yes." Commissioner Greg Tompkins, who said he wanted to reduce the donation to \$20,000 to leave money for other requests this year, cast the sole dissenting vote.



The theater's current owners, Dennis Ledford, Mark Anderson and others, submitted a request in December for a \$40,000 donation from the outreach fund, but Johnson said action on that was delayed due to the death of Commissioner Jim Duncan.

During discussion before the vote, Ledford and other supporters spoke about how the theater has become a magnet bringing visitors to the area as well as a resource for numerous other nonprofit agencies to stage fundraising activities.

"It needs to be a legacy for the community," Ledford told commissioners.

Kimball, Johnson and Tompkins all voiced agreement on the value of the theater but were divided on how much should be granted from the outreach fund.

According to Kimball, the Community Outreach Fund now has \$183,000 in it, and not more than \$30,000 can be granted this year without commissioners making a budget amendment to increase the amount. The fund is nonrenewable, meaning that once all the money has been granted, no more will be available.

Tompkins said the bulk of the money in the fund came from back taxes owed to the county by the now-defunct Ponderosa Fibers mill operation in Wallula. When the mill was sold several years ago and the taxes paid, commissioners agreed to put the money into a separate fund for community outreach projects.

The city of Walla Walla is donating half what the theater owners requested.

As with county commissioners, the City Council vote was split 5-2 with Councilmen Myron Huie and Riley Clubb dissenting. The \$25,000 that will come from the city's general fund was half what theater owners requested.

During discussion of the request, Huie said he was worried that allocating \$50,000 over two years from the general fund would open up a flood of similar requests the city would not be able to fulfill. Huie said the city should focus on building up its savings and investing in things like infrastructure and the fire department.

“Even though I think the Power House Theatre is awesome,” he said, “these are wants, not needs. I think the City Council should be focused on needs, not wants.”

Councilman Tom Scribner supported allocating \$25,000 this year with the understanding that the Lodging Tax Advisory Committee, which he currently heads, would take up any requests in the future. That tax revenue, which property owners pay when renting out rooms for overnight stays, should be considered for funding the theater because it is collected specifically to promote tourism, he said.

Clubb opposed allocating the \$25,000, saying public funds for the theater should come entirely from lodging tax.

“It seems like (lodging tax revenue) is more appropriate for this request so it doesn't make sense to me,” he said.

Information on the Gesa Power House Theatre's website states the organization is currently a limited liability company owned and operated by Anderson and Ledford and other partners.

As part of a transition plan, the current owners will gift their equity in the LLC to the nonprofit.

The board of directors of the nonprofit Power House Theatre consists of Bill Clemens, Michelle Conner, Ted Cox, Karl Eckhardt, Mike Martin, Jim Michelson, Barbara Peterson, Sandra Simonson, Dick Swenson, Amy Watkins and Kris Youd.

Correction

The board of directors of the nonprofit Power House Theatre of Walla Walla, which is transitioning from the LLC GESA Power House Theatre, consists of Bill Clemens, Michelle Conner, Ted Cox, Karl Eckhardt, Mike Martin, Jim Michelson, Barbara Peterson, Sandra Simonson, Dick Swenson, Amy Watkins and Kris Youd.

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