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Power House moves to nonprofit ownership

Vicki Hillhouse

Oct 20, 2016

A nonprofit organization is raising funds to acquire the Gesa Power House Theatre building and taking over the operation from the limited liability company that converted the defunct power generating facility into a hub for community arts.

The latest is a recommendation from the Washington State Department of Commerce to allocate \$335,000 from the Building for the Arts Fund in the capital budget of the next biennium.

That amount combines with more than \$1.6 million in individual giving, the equity gifted by owners.

Another \$1.2 million will need to be raised between now and Dec. 31, 2017, to complete the acquisition, said Lawson Knight, managing principal of nonprofit fund management organization Intermountain Impact Investments.

Knight is helping operators with the transition to nonprofit ownership.

The change isn't necessarily one that will have a visible impact for patrons. But it's a necessary step in the 5-year-old operation, he said.

"The Power House generates income, it has good people running it, it has customers, it's well-maintained," he said. "It just now needs a corporate structure."

The structure is in line with industry standards for such operations. Most theaters run as either nonprofit or civic ownership, he said.

It's also part of the vision when Mark Anderson and Dennis Ledford, with others, began the project.

"Since the theater opened, we have wanted to create a facility that would change the culture of Walla Walla and the surrounding area," Anderson said in a prepared statement. "The Power House is a community gathering place for a variety of events and programming. We have now made a clear path toward a business model that can keep the theater sustainable for years and years to come."

Anderson and Ledford will continue to serve on the board of the new nonprofit. They're joined by Ken Harrison, Barbara Peterson and Bill Clemens. The nonprofit was formed over the summer. The hope is to raise public, philanthropic and corporate support to complete the acquisition.

The 368-seat theater was converted from a 120-year-old former power generating facility at 111 N. Sixth Ave. It was remade to mirror the design of the Blackfriars Theatre in London, where William Shakespeare presented his plays in the early 1600s.

An initial vision was an indoor theater that could bring the seasonal Shakespeare festival that came into town in a more permanent location. The vision for the festival didn't take off quite as thought.

However, the theater itself grew into a hub for its own productions and rentals to performance groups and organizations putting on events and fundraisers. Last year, 18,000 people purchased tickets for shows at the historic property. That included musicals, dances, live theater, concerts and comedy.

Vicki Hillhouse can be reached at 509-526-8321, vickihillhouse@wwub.com or on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/VickiHillhouse>.

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Vicki covers business and economic development, including tourism, the Port of Walla Walla and the Strictly Business column, as well as features. She has been reporting for the Union-Bulletin since late 2001.