

# The East County Californian



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## ECPAC: The elephant in the room

By Derek Shaw

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Over the past 25 years, the El Cajon Performing Arts Center (ECPAC) has been plagued by repeated shifts in management and inconsistent support from the public and private sector.

Originally, the center was built in 1977 under an agreement between the city and Joint Powers Association. The association, a government agency, later unloaded the burden of running the dynamic arts center, which it was unequipped to handle.

From there, the Grossmont College System assumed control of ECPAC by default, and the district spent \$500,000 annually from its general

fund for center operations and capital improvement. Eventually, the teacher's union decided it wasn't fair for it to foot the entire arts bill for the city of El Cajon.

The Christian Community Theater took over the duty in the mid-90s and wanted to independently run the theater through the college district with a balanced budget but without outside sources. The city later took over the responsibility for ECPAC, and CCT continued to refuse subsidy.

The venue fell into disrepair and lacked proper maintenance during CCT's tenure, according to a city commissioned blue-ribbon report.

Paul Russell, CCT's executive and artistic director, admits that his group underestimated fundraising ability and costs, and the income

from performances didn't even pay for the salaries of employees.

A more comprehensive approach was taken when the city council decided to hire a new operator in 1998. The non-profit Arts Center Foundation was founded in response to an expanded city budget and an "open checkbook for the arts," according to El Cajon Mayor Mark Lewis. The deal was that ACF would be reimbursed by the city of El Cajon for all its bills.

Over the years, however, the city was no longer able to raise funds to pay for big acts. Lewis attributed the floundering arts program to a general loss of community support and economic decline. The \$350,000 annual city subsidy promised to ACF was stripped from the budget, leaving the

non-profit group responsible for its own fundraising.

"At that point, the city council wasn't criticizing their work or attacking the arts, we were watching out for the taxpayers," Lewis said.

As a result, ACF fell behind in payments to the city, and soon millions were being spent without being put back into the treasury.

Last year, the city council decided to absorb the \$2.3 million in losses and fire ACF as manager of ECPAC. The outstanding debt was shouldered by taxpayers as new options were explored for El Cajon's only performing arts center.

Each time the city council has thrown out the current manager, it has cost local citizens millions of

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Lemon Grove resident

**ECPAC**

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dollars, not including the hundreds of thousands taxpayers have paid annually to subsidize unsuccessful operations and mounting debt.

After dismissing ACF, the El Cajon City Council decided to reinstate a \$350,000 annual subsidy for the arts center, provided that the city writes one check and becomes absolved of further financial responsibility.

Former ACF directors including CEO Dick Zellner wondered why Lewis was willing to put up that much money after refusing to make good on the agreed-upon \$350,000 subsidy the past two years.

"If the city council had continued the subsidy and provided us with the same opportunity as the current operators, then our donors would have stuck with us, and we

making it the new manager of the El Cajon Performing Arts Center. Art Beat was created as a business branch of CCT so the group could assume responsibility for a city-owned venue. It will stage its own productions there as well as aim to book 10 nationally recognized acts a year as opposed to the dozens once hosted by ACF.

Art Beat was picked to manage the East County Performing Arts Center after a 60-day bid process. It was the only one to submit a proposal though many applications were sent out.

"Many of those who received applications would still have developed a proposal if there had been any indication from the city that El Cajon actually would have allowed an operator to develop the center in a professional and effective manner," said Bob Durrant, CEO of Creative Restaurant Group. "The council can dismiss

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**- Mark Lewis  
El Cajon mayor**

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wouldn't have fallen behind," said Clayton Anderson, former chairman on the Arts Center Foundation.

However, Lewis said that the city didn't have the money then, but that is no longer the issue. He also said that ACF was given ample time to set higher fundraising goals. He denies that he and other members of the city council orchestrated the ACF's termination as a means of reinstating the Christian Community Theater as the ECPAC manager.

The city finalized its contract with Christian Community Theater in December of last year,

opposition to the process as sour grapes, but responsible organizations refusing to participate in a poorly administered request for proposals was only a smart business decision."

Some community members such as Durrant and Kari Nye, however, said they believe that CCT was slated as ECPAC's successor long before a vote was ever taken. Others have questioned the city's funding of a religious organization in charge of a public entity.

"I don't see a conflict of interests here ... this is a local man with the community's best interests at heart," said El Cajon City

Councilman Bob McClellan. "We should all have equal access to government funding as long as it's for the betterment of El Cajon."

Changes to the contract included a \$1-a-ticket renovation fee for all events. Organizations that stage non-ticketed productions will pay an amount equal to 10 percent of the total cost of their rental fees. The money will be put into a separate account that will be used solely for theater maintenance and improvements.

The city of El Cajon granted Art Beat an operations subsidy of \$350,000 and an additional subsidy of \$100,000 for improvements and refurbishing.

"I want to create a home for CCT and CYT in the heart of El Cajon," declared Russell, who has staged performances atop Mt. Helix for years but would prefer a permanent setting with more control, resources and mobility. "I want ECPAC to put East County on the map like the La Jolla Playhouse did for UCSD and the Old Globe did for Balboa Park."

Russell personally booked the first act. Laura Schlessinger, better known as Dr. Laura, has performed two solo shows to capacity crowds.

Russell said he wants to transform ECPAC into a renowned venue with an appeal to tourists as well as those outside the community. But he said that national acts are not drawing sufficient audiences, and most headliners have contracts with guaranteed fees despite the number in attendance.

There is stiff competition from nearby Indian reservations and corporate venues like Coor's Amphitheater and the I-Pay One Center. The commission found that headliner acts like the Dixie Chicks, comedian Bill Maher and Creedence Clearwater Revival have doubled or tripled their fees, and some big name performers are avoiding ECPAC because casinos offer better compensation packages with more amenities.

"We're losing money on almost every major show so we're changing to a more community oriented, publicly supported approach," Russell said. "Local events are well attended and pay for themselves."

Russell expressed disappoint-

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ment in the turnout for headliner shows thus far, saying that he is open to hosting them but that "Art Beat, in of itself, will no longer be able to co-sponsor events, instead shows will be independently produced unless CCT is commissioned as a full-service production company."

Russell admitted that casinos and corporate venues make it difficult for smaller public entities to keep up with the competition. He said he still wants to make the facility available for community rentals because he wants to focus on East County culture. Jewish and Filipino groups have reserved the ECPAC for religious holidays, and high schools and churches are also able to reserve the theater.

"I think a local focus in programming is great because it will attract people from our community," McClellan commented. "The taxpayers fund this venue, and they deserve the entertainment."

However, Lewis has another vision for the theater.

"I don't want to see ECPAC used for community rentals anymore," Lewis stated. "I recently attended a production of Mama Cass that was an embarrassment ... poor seating arrangements, the show started late, the leading actress did not perform and a mix-up with the music resulted in minutes of awkward silence."

Since taking over in January, Art Beat has only hosted a handful of headliner shows at ECPAC to a lukewarm response. Many of the future acts lined up are CCT and CYT-related events including entire days devoted to rehearsals and award ceremonies.

"We need to stay within our means while expanding our operations to draw wider audiences," Lewis emphasized. Lewis said he envisions ECPAC as an "active

showcase with a moderate number of big acts blended with local entertainment every single day."

Lewis touted Dr. Laura and a Beatles tribute band as examples of big name performers with positive messages who sold out ECPAC.

"Headliners get people off the couch, and I want to continue to bring in acts that are tailored to the venue like comedy, rock and roll, blues, jazz, gospel and bluegrass," Lewis said. "ACF used to close down the theater during the summer, but that's the best time to attract couples and families who shop and dine during warm evenings."

Lewis said he would like big screens to be added to the facility so that the theater could also be used for movie screenings, silent films and travel logs. He also expressed an interest in creating festivals dedicated to western flicks, which would correlate with the theme of Main Street. ~~The goal is to keep~~ downtown buzzing in order to attract customers to shops, restaurants and businesses.

"ECPAC needs to better market itself to promote its upcoming events," admitted Lewis.

Downtown businesses owners agree.

"The impact from ECPAC just isn't the same as before...when they used to have big shows, we'd be forced to overstaff to deal with the rush," said Gabe Marrujo, owner of Por Favor and the Downtown Café, which both reside blocks from ECPAC. "They just aren't bringing heads, and we're only receiving 20-25 percent of the business we used to get from performances."

Anderson said that the Arts Center Foundation was drawing solid crowds for big events and attracting customers to local busi-