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## The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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# Leaders hear pitch for arts center dining, shops

By **Liz Neely**  
STAFF WRITER

March 24, 2004

EL CAJON – A proposed \$14.4 million expansion of the East County Performing Arts Center would jump-start interest in El Cajon's downtown, creating jobs and generating more revenue for the venue, a developer said yesterday.

Creative Restaurant Group Inc. wants to build a conference center, two restaurants, specialty shops and office space on a 3-acre site adjacent to the theater venue.

The 79,883-square-foot project would include family-style dining, a four-star restaurant and lounge, a glass atrium and palm tree-lined walkway that would serve as the new main entrance, allowing people to access the venue from Main Street. Plans also include meeting rooms, storage space and a conference center that would double as a ballroom.

The El Cajon-based development company was formed specifically for this project, said marketing consultant G. Cole Davis. The development is expected to cost \$14.4 million, not including land acquisition, or additional parking spaces.

Dick Zellner, president of the Arts Center Foundation, which runs the performing arts center, said the project would attract more top-name entertainers, bringing more concert-goers downtown.

About 60 percent of the venue's audience lives outside of the 92020 ZIP code. Presented yesterday to the City Council and other city leaders, the proposal is still just that – a proposal. Official negotiations have not begun, a necessary step because the land is owned by the city and the El

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Cajon Redevelopment Agency.

Creative Restaurant Group is ready to move forward, Davis said. Over the past 10 months the company has conducted research, secured investors, negotiated with restaurants and completed preliminary drawings of the project.

Some officials, including City Manager Bill Garrett, said the city should entertain proposals from other developers before moving ahead. At least one other company has expressed interest in such a project, Garrett said.

El Cajon has been talking about expanding the venue and adding restaurants and catering capabilities for at least five years, said Claire Carpenter, president and CEO of the El Cajon Community Development Corp.

Carpenter said she understands why the city would want to entertain other offers, but said "ideas have floated around and nothing has come to fruition."

"It's not a new idea to do an expansion," she said. "I would rather see a good idea embraced than lost because of sudden interest in" other proposals.

Bob Durrant, president and CEO of Creative Restaurant Group, said his company's research shows the project would be successful, attracting lawyers and county employees who work at the East County courthouse.

Though there isn't much need for a 21,000-square-foot conference center now, Durrant said that will change.

"We're building this not for now; we're building this for the future," Durrant said.

Most large business meetings and awards dinners are held in Mission Valley or in other parts of the county because there isn't an appropriate venue in the East County, Carpenter said.

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