

Statesman



Council mulls performing arts center study

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“Arts centers have a strong tradition of support by arts philanthropists. ... You would need 140 to 200 use dates per venue.”-Janis Barlow

A performing arts center could be a big draw of tourism and visitor dollars to Lakeway, if executed correctly, according to the city’s newly hired consultant.

The Lakeway Visitors Commission worked for several months with Janis Barlow & Associates on part one of a two-part feasibility study to determine the potential for success of a convention or performing arts center. Barlow herself said she spoke with many residents and did market research concerning the supply and demand for those types of facilities locally, keeping in mind the city’s goals for attracting low-volume overnight tourism.

“A conference center was looked at intensely initially,” Barlow said. “Then we looked at the community impact. There would be a number of hotels interested in (conference centers). Hotel developers are really better positioned to develop a full-service conference business ... It’s been established over many years and over different studies that it’s a high-risk venture to do a conference center without full-scale commercial accommodation, and so we don’t recommend a standalone conference center because it’s a little too high-risk.”

However, Barlow said, a performing arts center might be more practical for Lakeway – and in demand locally as well as in the Austin area.

“The theater option looked good because traditionally as far as a municipal development for this scale city, a theater can be a catalyst for economic, social and cultural development,” Barlow said. “You have a splendid activity center that is at capacity, so this is the next logical stage of growth, and there is evidence a small presentation house could be sustainable in Lakeway.”



Rachel Rice

Lakeway City Council heard a presentation on the feasibility of a performing arts center in Lakeway.

Barlow said the local and regional demographics lined up perfectly with the typical customer base for a performing arts center with seasonal shows, featured performers and local acts. She suggested there was market demand for an 800- to 900-seat theater in the Austin area. In Travis County, she said, there is a gap in theater facilities in the 500- to 1,799-seat range.

Barlow detailed the business model options the city might employ for a performing arts center, such as renting the theater to a performing company, presenting programs based on market demand or co-producing theater shows.

“Theaters are very expensive buildings, which may require public-private partnerships,” Barlow said. “Arts centers have a strong tradition of support by arts philanthropists. ... You would need 140 to 200 use dates per venue.”

Arts Committee Chair Fred Newton commented, saying the council should exercise caution in any potential endeavor to build a theater.

“I suggest we look at a more feasible size, such as a 150-seat theater,” Newton said. “I surveyed the local theater industry, and these size theaters are successful and operate throughout the year nearly every weekend. All of these theaters indicated to me willingness to share operational information. We don’t need one like at the high school that sits dark most of the year.”

Council approved a contract with Janis Barlow & Associates to complete the second part of their feasibility study on an arts and conference center.