

Victoria tired of paying theatre bill alone

Bill Cleverley / Times Colonist
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The McPherson Theatre is funded through the Capital Regional District, but only Victoria contributes. Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, Times Colonist

When the curtain rises at the McPherson Theatre, other municipalities are enjoying the show, but it's just Victoria paying the bills, complain some Victoria councillors.

And with declining attendance and increasing costs, that has to change, they say.

"We have to fish or cut bait here," said Coun. Geoff Young, after hearing a recent presentation from the non-profit Royal McPherson Theatre Society, which manages both the McPherson and the Royal theatres.

Victoria's operating and capital subsidy to the McPherson is \$750,000 a year. Young and some other city councillors say they are tired of the city paying the bills for what they believe to be a regional facility.

"To provide fairness in our taxation and how it goes to cultural programming, we have to see a bigger regional role, or these subsidies, either operating or capital or both, I don't think are going to be sustainable or justifiable," said Coun. Ben Isitt.

In 1999, the city succeeded in having the McPherson funded through the Capital Regional District, in the hope that other municipalities would view it as a regional facility and chip in to cover a portion of the costs. That has never happened. While Victoria, Oak Bay and Saanich all contribute to the costs of the Royal Theatre, only Victoria contributes to the McPherson.

Because the city is the only funder of the McPherson, its budget doesn't get close scrutiny at the CRD table, said Young, who suggests that one of the problems with the McPherson is that it's too expensive for smaller non-profits to use.

But a consultant hired by the Royal/McPherson board said that the Royal McPherson Theatre Society is an extremely efficient and well-run operation.

In fact, consultant Janis Barlow said the society's operating subsidy of \$485,000 is the lowest in the country when compared to government-owned theatres in such centres as Calgary, Montreal, Vancouver, Nanaimo, Ottawa and Toronto.

Barlow agreed audiences at the McPherson are declining, but said that could be due to a number of factors. "I suspect it's due to limitations in funding and therefore [a limited budget for] communications, promotion, target marketing [and] more sophisticated marketing box-office assistance in the user groups," she told Victoria councillors.

Stopping the attendance decline will take more money, not less, she said.

While the Royal is a stable operation, the McPherson's seating capacity is too high for rental by many local groups and too low for many commercial tours, she said.

What's really needed, she said, is a third facility — a studio theatre and rehearsal hall and an increase in the

annual funding of about \$175,000 a year for three years for community relations and development.

Barlow called the Royal and the McPherson “a two-legged stool.”

“I think they need a third leg. They need an incubator space to develop and also to provide a rehearsal space. It’s uneconomical to rehearse everything on the stages of these theatres. It doesn’t make sense.”

Barlow noted that, for 17 years, funding from Victoria for the theatre society has been fixed.

“They’ve maximized their business opportunities. They’ve minimized risk. They’ve flown under the radar and their track record, in terms of finance and programming, is really unparalleled in Canada,” she said.

Isitt questioned some of the financial comparisons being used, noting that in addition to the \$485,000 operating subsidy, the city provides \$845,000 toward capital costs for the two facilities.

He said that in fairness, other municipalities should be contributing more.

“Victoria has, along with Esquimalt, the lowest-income residents. I think that’s why we’re seeing pushback against the very large subsidies we give annually to arts organizations,” Isitt said.

“The patrons of the Royal and McPherson, and also the 40 groups that benefit from the grants, are, I think, disproportionately the most affluent residents and many of them don’t reside in the City of Victoria.”

Young said it may be time to bring the McPherson back under city control.

“I feel that rather than the Mac board hiring a consultant, I think what has to happen is that the city council needs to hire somebody to give us some advice on what the issues are, talk to the user groups and bring us a report — not through the Royal board — but directly to the council,” Young said.

Coun. Pam Madoff, who sits on the theatre society’s board, said Barlow’s report showed that the Royal/McPherson is “one of the best-run theatres in the country, with one of the lowest rates of subsidy in the country.”

She said a smaller, 250-seat theatre has long been identified as lacking in the region. “If it was in addition to the Royal Theatre, it would also provide a rehearsal space so we don’t tie up the main stage for rehearsals when, in fact, it could be rented for other purposes.”

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