

VALUE OF THE ARTS IN PEORIA

By Bob Barrett

There are many reasons to support the arts in Peoria. The arts give a city a sense of place and add the vibrancy that is really necessary to make it a place where people want to live. I've said many times that any group of people can lay the asphalt for streets and bricks and mortar for buildings but the arts, and embracing the many facets that make up the arts, is what gives a city its heart and soul.

I'm not an expert so I'm not going to try to define "the arts."

However, lately we've had conversations about two arts venues that have struggled due to the economic downturn. They are similar, yet different. They are Theater Works, a community theater, and the Arizona Broadway Theatre (ABT), a professional theater organization. Both venues present plays, both are well respected, both also offer children's workshops...and both are struggling.

In 2001 voters authorized the construction of the Peoria Center for the Performing Arts and Theater Works became the managing tenant in the building. The rent to Theater Works is \$1 a year. However, Theater Works also manages the building and it costs them about \$1 million a year in maintenance, upkeep and utility costs. Obviously, it does not survive on ticket sales alone. It needs donations and grants to continue operation under the current terms of its agreement with the city. Needless to say, donations are down and grants are few and far between.

Theater Works officials came to the City Council and asked to renegotiate the operating agreement. The City Council denied staff's recommendation to hire a consultant to help develop a new operating agreement despite staff's admission that no city employee has any theater expertise. Theater Works officials and city staff have started discussions about what to do.

ABT started as a commercial entity and, like Theater Works, is now a 501C3. ABT owns its building, but it sits on property owned by the city. When they encountered financial difficulties an agreement was reached where their rent due would be postponed until they became more financially viable.

Like Theater Works, ABT came to the city and asked the rent due be forgiven or it would have to scale back its operations and possibly go out of business. The argument is that they provide more than 100 jobs, generate sales tax revenue and attract visitors from around the Valley to Peoria. If it goes out of business, the city receives no rent but loses the jobs, public exposure and sales tax revenue.

Again, the city is in discussions with ABT to consider their requests.

Both Theater Works and ABT benefit the city. We need to find a way to keep both of them viable and in business.

It's not only good business for the city, but it's also good for our "heart."