

Masque continues search for – hopefully – temporary home

By Debbie Carson, Staff Writer

Read about Tuesday's Art and Education Center workshop Tuesday night at www.cnewspubs.com/beacon

TEMPLE TERRACE — Masque Community Theatre has been homeless more times than most members dare to count.

Yet this latest potential move is stirring up angst amongst the members while the Temple Terrace City Council debates the location and potential inclusion of a multi-million dollar arts center within the downtown redevelopment area.

Some members, including Joyce Meitin and Bob Mitchell, are optimistic that Masque will find a temporary home before they have to move out of their current one near Sweetbay Supermarket on N. 56th Street.

"You work it out," Meitin said during Masque's general meeting last week. "Masque has been a gypsy for how many years?!"

Mitchell expressed similar sentiments when Mayor Joe Affronti suggested moving Masque to the Temple Terrace Golf and County Club.

"With a little ingenuity, we can make that work," Mitchell said, noting that the theatre group could install a temporary stage in front of the current, small stage in the clubhouse and use that area for the props and such needed for the given production.

"It's not 'perfect,' " Meitin added, "what we're used to." But, "it can work. It's worked before."

Other Masque members didn't appear so convinced.

Board President Joe LoPinto said that the group could find another place to perform, but storage is the crucial issue.

No one has been able to come up with a suitable plan for storage so far, though Masque's members are open to suggestions.

Mayor Affronti had been invited to the general meeting to discuss Masque's future in the city and the city's plans for the Arts and Education Center.

He told the members that the council still has to decide whether or not to include the arts center in the downtown area, adding that if he had to guess, he'd say that there are enough votes currently in support of the arts center.

If the council decides to include the center in the project, it could be as many as two years from closing before the facility was built and operational, the mayor added. The timing depends on the amount of money the city would have to raise to pay for it and how quickly that money came in.

The current estimate is \$7 million for the building and an endowment to get it started.

Of that, the city has \$2.5 million from its community investment tax, \$500,000 from Hillsborough County, and a pledge of \$2 million from the Pepin Distributing Co., leaving \$2 million to be found elsewhere.

"That's nothing!" shouted Denise Deneen, Masque's house manager and prop master. "We can do that."

In the meantime, Masque would have to find a new home in as little as 90 days after the city and development team, Pinnacle/Ram, close on the contract.

Mayor Affronti said that the 90-day timeframe is based on how long the developer expects it to take in pulling the necessary building permits and other required documents.

The mayor suggested a few temporary homes for Masque, though none appeared to satisfy the entire group.

The First Baptist Church of Temple Terrace would be large enough to handle the audience, but Masque would have to pay rent and would probably have to get approval from the church's leaders for certain productions.

The country club could also handle a moderate-sized crowd, though the stage – as is – would be too small.

Mayor Affronti recommended putting on smaller productions to fit the space.

"They don't bring in the money," said Ruth Kegel, the group's public relations director.

"If you're going to rule out every option, then tell me what the options are," Mayor Affronti responded.

"We have to look at this as a temporary thing," he later added.

The Lightfoot Recreation Center was also suggested, though it is undergoing a massive interior overhaul and is not expected to have much room for productions as it had before.

Grant Rimbey made the suggestion that Masque find an empty big box store similar to the one it's currently in. He mentioned an empty store on Busch Boulevard.

"There's plenty of bombed out" shopping centers in the area, he said.

Fast facts about the proposed Arts and Education Center

- Location: north of Sweetbay Supermarket
- Size: Footprint to be 22,000 square feet, though it could be built to be multiple stories
- Parking: A two-deck parking garage is planned to accommodate the center's users
- Amenities: stage/auditorium with 400 retractable seats, classrooms, meeting and board rooms, conference space, a concessions stand, gallery space, more
- Budget: Anticipated \$7 million
- Tenants: Proposed tenants include Masque Community Theatre, Toast of Tampa, the Greater Temple Terrace Chamber of Commerce, Hillsborough Community College, others
- Restrictions: Development team Pinnacle/Ram has a say over who the tenants are and what they're – generally – allowed to do. The purpose is to be sure that none of the city's tenants in the center directly compete with the businesses that the developer is trying to attract into the rest of the development. However, Pinnacle/Ram will have no say in what productions the various performing groups are allowed or not allowed to perform.

Share your opinion of the Arts and Education Center on the Web

Tell us and your fellow readers what you think about the center's inclusion in the downtown project. Go to www.cnewspubs.com/opinion and click "FORUM" and leave your comments on the "Temple Terrace Arts" forum. While you're there, be sure to check out the other forums we have posted.