

No easy answers for Masque's future downtown

By Debbie Carson, Staff Writer

TEMPLE TERRACE — The Temple Terrace council chambers were packed last Tuesday night with several children sitting on the floor, on each other's laps or leaning against the walls. They weren't there for a school project or because their parents had business before the City Council.

Instead, they were there to plead with the council to include the Arts and Education Center within the downtown redevelopment area and impress upon them the importance of finding the community theatre a temporary home as development begins.

Sixteen-year-old Jamey Freshold donned a costume including a gray, curly wig and approached the council.

"Masque means a lot," he told the members. Masque teaches teamwork, cooperation, strength.

If not for his participation in Masque, he said he did not believe he would have had the strength and courage to address the council.

His sentiments were echoed by a number of other actors and members of Masque.

"We're all kind of one big family at Masque," said another actor, one who takes theatre at school and knows that not everyone there wants to be there.

It's different at Masque, though, she said.

"They want to be there," the members of Masque.

Another girl said she started acting at age 3 at other venues – though none has taught her as much as she has learned from Masque.

"This isn't just a hobby," she told the council. To her, and many others, Masque is their training ground "for what we want to be in our lives."

For the members of Masque Community Theatre, and even the other performing groups that call the theatre home, the downtown redevelopment project has become both a blessing and a curse.

The blessing could be the new Arts and Education Center building – if the city council approves it. The curse, however, could be the Arts and Education Center.

While Pinnacle/Ram, the city's downtown redevelopment partner, prepares to renovate the Sweetbay shopping center in order to move in a junior anchor, Masque must find a temporary home.

The Arts and Education Center could be more than two years away, leaving Masque homeless for that period of time.

Mayor Joe Affronti and others have suggested several places where Masque could potentially rehearse and perform – all of which might be feasible.

The real problem, according to Masque's president, Joe LoPinto, is storage. Masque will have to find a home for all of its props, scenery, costumes and other items it has collected over the years.

"We're not here in confrontation," Masque President Joe LoPinto told the members of the council.

He told the council that the theatre group is in a tough spot and is considering all of its options, including the possibility of buying its own building elsewhere.

"The last thing we want to do is move out of Temple Terrace," LoPinto said. "That's where our heart is."

However, with the real estate market the way it is, he said that Masque could most likely find its own place. He said that he is confident the group could get enough donations to buy another building.

The council members expressed concern about Masque moving away, noting that they all support including the Arts and Education Center in the redevelopment area, though none could guarantee the citizens would donate \$2 million to see it become a reality.

Councilman Mark Knapp was absent from the meeting due to an injury.

They cautioned Masque, noting that they expected to take a vote on the center either later in July or in August.

Mayor Affronti, near the end of the public discussion, said that he had the impression that Masque's members thought the city was kicking them out of their current home. He reminded them that the city has been working on the redevelopment effort for seven years and that the city knew all along that it planned to have a cultural center somewhere in the downtown area.

"We need to be a team," the mayor said. "We need your help to work together as a team to find a solution."

Arts and Education Center at a glance

- Location: North of Sweetbay
- Size: 22,000-square-foot footprint with ability to grow upward
- Cost: Estimated at \$7 million, including a \$1 million endowment
- Funding: Expected funding includes a \$2 million pledge from Pepin Distributing through corporate sponsorships; \$500,000 from a Hillsborough County grant; \$2.5 million from Temple Terrace's community investment tax that needs to be approved by council; \$2 million to be raised through citizen-driven fund-raising.

Speak out:

What do you think about the Arts and Education Center? Tell us 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.