

SEIDMAN SAYS: Extension request gives city chance to reconsider Sarasota Performing Arts Center, Van Wezel

On Monday the [Sarasota City Commission](#) will decide whether to extend until November 2024 the deadline for the Sarasota Performing Arts Center (SPAC) Foundation to submit an implementation plan for its aspirational performing arts facility, the proposed centerpiece of The Bay redevelopment project.

According to a [preliminary agreement](#) passed (3-2) by the previous commission, which postulated the city would bear half the cost of the estimated \$300-350 million facility, the Foundation was to have submitted a number of “deliverables” this month – among them a project concept, a permitting and construction schedule and intended design, scope and budget plans.

The request for more time presents this commission with an opportunity to reconsider the hasty decision their predecessors made – without any meaningful analysis – to partner on a new building that would be the largest discretionary expenditure in the region’s history.



Should it continue down the path of committing millions to the SPAC, at the expense of other priorities and the rest of The Bay Park? Should it terminate the exploratory agreement since the [Sarasota Orchestra](#), once envisioned as a primary tenant, decided to build its own hall? Or

should it let the agreement sunset, revert to its roots and let the [Bay Park Conservancy](#) oversee future cultural park needs?

This postponement offers a belated opportunity to answer a question that's been long been ignored, dodged or deferred: Does preserving and updating the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall present a viable alternative to building a new facility?

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Ever since the SPAC Foundation brought forward the replacement proposal for the Van Wezel last spring, commissioners have been asking for an “apples to apples” comparison of the two options. No such study has ever materialized. That's given birth to a [Keep the Van Wezel](#) campaign that promotes upgrading the city-owned purple hall as a cost-effective alternative to SPAC, which is portrayed as unnecessary, overambitious and financially unwise. Before the city agrees to undertake a commitment of this magnitude, it's time to ask: Do we need this? Can we afford this? And do we have the analysis to make an informed choice?



Need: The Foundation argues the city needs a modern facility with more seats and greater technology to compete for major shows in the marketplace. SPAC opponents say the 1,741-seat Van Wezel is already adequate (only 11% of shows sell out) and that, regardless of size or capabilities of a new venue, the “hottest” tours would still go to Tampa’s Straz Center, which, due to contractual “blackouts,” prohibits any venue within 90 miles from hosting the same show.

Cost: The Foundation pledged to raise privately half the funds for the building, with the city paying for its half through a TIF (tax increment financing district), a revenue bond, and state and federal grants. Due to The Quay buildout and a leap in real estate values, that TIF is earning the targeted amount at a much faster rate than expected when it was created in 2019. To free up the restricted tax money for other pressing priorities – such as affordable housing, water and infrastructure improvements – the county commission has already said it would like to see the TIF end after 15 years. By 2035, it will have amassed approximately \$150 million, about \$100

million of which will be used to fund Phase 2 of the park itself – leaving little for investment for anything else, such as the parking lot to greenspace conversion. The estimated cost to do deferred maintenance, change seating, add digital lighting and waterproof the Van Wezel is \$12 million.

Climate: The Foundation says the Van Wezel is the structure most vulnerable to climate change in the city, that its condition is unsound and that FEMA codes preclude spending more than 50% of the building's value on renovation, making retrofitting impossible. Opponents argue obtaining historic designation for the Van Wezel would nullify the FEMA rule and bring preservation grants and economic incentives to make renovations affordable. A little-circulated 2021 engineering report commissioned by the city showed the building to be structurally sound, amenable to waterproofing and no more vulnerable than the nearby proposed SPAC site.



Design: The Foundation says the lack of a center aisle at the Van Wezel makes entrances and exits difficult and even dangerous and that its acoustics are poor. Van Wezel advocates say it currently takes less than four minutes to exit a full house, that a center aisle could be added and that the acoustics are fine for everything but symphonic performances, which require a different structural design.

Parking: The Foundation plans for off-site parking with shuttles (operated and paid for by the city). Opponents claim the new building would eat up nearly 5 acres of park greenspace and that on-site parking (preferably a garage) is more realistic for Sarasota's car-dependent demographic.

Architecture: A committee has already selected architects to submit designs for a SPAC they say will be a hallmark for the city and a boon to its reputation as an arts and cultural hub. Opponents point to the significance of the Van Wezel, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright's son-in-law to echo the color and lines of a seashell and is already considered a building of architectural and historic distinction.

Who's right and who's wrong? That's just the problem. The research and analysis that should have clarified for commissioners whether partnering in this project was a wise stewardship of taxpayer money has never been done. Just as they have often embraced development without considering its future impact on infrastructure, traffic and housing, they entered into this initial agreement before fully contemplating its consequences.

Here's a chance for them to reassess; let's hope they do.

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