

## **Capitol Theatre** poised for dramatic, \$15 million expansion

By DAVID LESTER and CHRIS BRISTOL YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Yakima's **Capitol Theatre** is poised for an ambitious expansion that supporters say would boost the downtown renaissance by creating a new arts-based campus and replace the defunct Yakima Mall as the emotional and economic heart of the city.

The theater is moving forward with plans to build a second theater venue, tear down the neighboring Wilson Building for a pavilion featuring a box office and a jazz club, and transform Third Street into a pedestrian plaza that would essentially become a new town square.

Steve Caffery, the Capitol's chief executive officer and managing director, has been quietly shopping his vision to city and community leaders for months. And while there's wide support for the \$15.2 million project, there's less enthusiasm for the plaza, which would require closing Third Street to traffic.

One idea - construction of a large glassed foyer in front of the theater - remains in the architectural design but has already drawn so much aesthetic flak that it's being re-evaluated. It's one indication of the reverence the community has for one of its most famous landmarks.

As Caffery envisions it, the theater will soon gain more space - and more prominence. Third Street would become an outdoor community space, with a fountain and a festival stage near the front of the theater, drawing people downtown for events such as a street musician or mime. It also would be a place to enjoy a cup of coffee or quiet time during the workday, Caffery says.

Motorists accustomed to crossing through Third Street between Yakima and Chestnut avenues would need to find an alternate street.

### *What the plan entails*

Caffery's plan, to be presented Tuesday to the Yakima City Council, involves two new buildings: a production facility behind the theater, and a two-story pavilion next door for a lobby, box office, office space, jazz club and cafe or wine bar at the corner of Third Street and Yakima Avenue.

Caffery says the production facility, with more space to load and unload equipment, is designed to keep the Capitol viable for ever-larger and more demanding stage shows. Because of its flexibility, he says, it could be converted from storage space into a more intimate theater that would entice a new lineup of entertainment to Yakima, including plays and live music.

Adding the pavilion - or community center, as Caffery calls it - means the 105-year-old Wilson Building, at the corner of Third Street and Yakima Avenue and now home to a gown and tuxedo shop and Kimmel Athletic Supply, is pegged for demolition.

"We have spent tens of thousands of dollars in research to put a concept together that relates back to supporting the **Capitol Theatre**," Caffery said during an interview in his office.

The reality is that rising production demands and costs eventually will outrun the theater's ability to serve the community, he said. Reversing that trend is his goal.

"The question is how do we do that? The strategy is to become more community-based" with facilities that attract more people downtown, Caffery said.

The theater, built in 1920, was lovingly restored to the smallest detail of its original renaissance architectural style after the structure burned down in 1975. But as much as people revere it, the theater will lose its ability to compete for shows unless it grows, Caffery said.

The brick-and-mortar part of the plan is largely under way and needs a city environmental review and building permits to proceed. Caffery and the theater's executive board presented the architectural design to all 20 members of the **Capitol Theatre** Committee on Oct. 26.

Council member Susan Whitman, also a theater committee member, said the executive board has been working with Caffery, but that he has taken the lead in conceptualizing and developing the theater's future.

"Until Friday, nothing was set in stone and it still isn't. All we have done is give them an idea of what we want," she said.

The theater already owns the Wilson Building to the north, which it purchased last year for \$425,000. The parking lot behind the theater was purchased from the Yakima YMCA in 2005 for \$288,000.

### *Third Street as a plaza?*

What the Capitol doesn't own is Third Street, where the potential shutdown to traffic is the most controversial element of the \$15.2 million project.

Four of the seven City Council members - Whitman, Micah Cawley, Neil McClure and Mayor Dave Edler - said they're willing to consider vacating the street in support of the plan. But council members Bill Lover and Norm Johnson said they disagree, arguing that Third Street is an important link to Nob Hill Boulevard and complicates access to the post office a block from the theater.

Council member Ron Bonlender has another idea: Narrow the street to two lanes, add parking along it and widen the sidewalks to accommodate some of the additions Caffery envisions.

The city has a special interest - and responsibility - because it owns the theater.

Bonlender said that while he's "trying to stay open to the idea of closing" Third Street, a better option might be to narrow it, like what was done several years ago one block west on Second Street, to maintain traffic flow, albeit at a slower speed.

Mayor Edler, on the other hand, described himself as a strong supporter of theater expansion and the pedestrian plaza.

"There is a lot of work that needs to be done and questions that need to be answered," Edler said. "Those things can come. One thing I'm personally committed to is the renaissance of the downtown, and the arts are an important piece of that. I believe the **Capitol Theatre** is a centerpiece."

Third Street carries an average of 4,610 cars per day. Yakima Avenue, by contrast, carries almost 17,000 vehicles daily.

Joan Davenport, a city traffic engineer, said it wouldn't pose a major traffic obstacle for motorists if Third Street were closed between Yakima and Chestnut avenues.

"We have lots of other parallel streets" that offer options, she said.

Third Street remains underused, and city officials say the impact of closing it to traffic could be offset by making Chestnut a two-way street. Chestnut currently runs one way from South First Street to Sixth Street.

Under the theater's plan, a turnaround would be built in front of the William O. Douglas federal courthouse, just to the south of the Capitol, to allow motorists to drop off or pick up passengers.

Two nearby neighbors, the Olive Garden restaurant and the Sports Center, say the theater project and pedestrian plaza are good ideas. Their concern is parking, which in certain areas of downtown is already in short supply.

"Parking's already becoming an issue, and downtown Yakima's still a ghost town," said Chris Malland, a co-owner of the Sports Center. He suggested the city dust off plans to build a parking garage.

Turning Third Street into an outdoor plaza would reduce access to the parking lot behind the Olive Garden. The restaurant's general manager, Jim Mead, said he had not heard about the closure until last week and agreed with Malland that parking needs to be addressed.

But Jim Larsen of Spokane, clerk of the court for the Eastern District of Washington, said those in the neighboring federal courthouse would support vacating the street and expansion of the theater, which he called a great addition to the downtown.

"My off-the-cuff reaction (about closing Third Street) is that would probably work," Larsen said.

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the courts and the U.S. Marshal Service have sought to improve federal courthouse security in Yakima by adding barricades in front of the Douglas building. Behind the courthouse, concrete barriers prohibit vehicle traffic from reaching the rear of the building.

#### *Shattering the glass*

The glass foyer idea appears to be off the table.

On paper, the architect's design indicates it would be enclosed during the winter, then open and used as a verandah during the summer.

But the \$1 million foyer was drawing little support from the City Council. Lover said he and Johnson are not enthused about obscuring the theater's grand architecture. And Whitman didn't care for the foyer idea.

The theater's committee apparently didn't like it either when members saw the architectural drawings for the first time Oct. 26.

In an e-mail to the Herald-Republic on Friday, Caffery said they expressed concern about the size and relationship of the foyer to the building.

"They directed us to rethink the concept," he wrote.

#### *Where the money comes from*

Nearly all the money needed to erect the production facility and pavilion - \$10.2 million - is in place.

About \$7.4 million of that is being raised with the help of state legislation that will allow the city to keep a portion of its sales-tax revenue to help finance the **Capitol Theatre**. Another \$1.4 million has been raised through private contributions.

Michael Morales, deputy director of the city Department of Community and Economic Development, said that once the **Capitol Theatre** submits final designs and cost estimates for approval next year, the city will sell a projected \$7 million in bonds for construction. The sales tax revenue would then be earmarked to pay off the bonds.

Plans are to break ground on the production center and pavilion in 2009 and have the buildings complete in two years.

Any closure of Third Street would come after that. City officials and Caffery say they would have to pursue approval for the closure and raise money to pay for the plaza.

On Tuesday, when he presents his concept to the City Council, Caffery will also ask the council to take \$500,000 from the theater's depreciation reserve fund. The money would be drawn as a loan and used to help pay the cost of relocating utilities and to pay for architectural and engineering services.

It's the third phase - the public portion of the project - that remains unresolved.

The closure of Third Street, with the fountain, glass foyer and pedestrian plaza, would cost about \$5 million.

Caffery suggests there are a variety of funding sources the city could tap into, such as federal tax credits, an increase in the cable franchise fee - which would likely be passed along to cable customers - and private fundraising. The city could also seek more money through the state capital budget, the state's arts program, or ask the Legislature to let Yakima keep even more sales-tax revenue.

#### *Friends in high places*

Although the project is ambitious and may face some challenges, the theater has a deep reservoir of influential supporters. Brian Roberts, the president of the **Capitol Theatre** Committee, is general manager of Argus Insurance and serves on the countywide economic development group New Vision. The theater committee's vice president, Russ Myers, is chief operating officer for Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital and serves on the United Way board.

Other committee members include Elizabeth McGree, daughter of Yakima Mall owner Joe Morrier; Morrie Shore, a longtime Yakima attorney; and state Rep. Mary Skinner, R-Yakima.

Some key downtown backers favor the expansion, calling the Capitol a jewel of the community.

Jamie Stickel, vice president of sales for the Yakima Herald-Republic and chairman of the nonprofit Committee for Downtown Yakima, said he is not aware of all the expansion details but noted that what he has heard is promising.

"Anything that offers another reason to come downtown is a good thing," Stickel said. "When you are trying to revitalize a gathering spot, you need reasons to gather."

What ultimately happens with the ambitious Capitol plan rests with the City Council and the community.

Councilman Micah Cawley said all the issues surrounding the project - transportation, parking and funding - need to be discussed openly.

"I'm interested in seeing the Capitol grow as Yakima grows also. I haven't seen any red flags yet," he said. "The downtown is definitely changing, but we need to make sure we're careful about how that happens and that what we do is in the best interests of all the citizens of Yakima."