The Boston Globe North

Creating a hotbed for the arts

By Steven A. Rosenberg | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 09, 2012

JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Mayor Judith Flanagan Kennedy expects Lynn Auditorium to offer shows year-round once a new air conditioning system is installed.

It's not every day that a cash-strapped city decides to lay out nearly $1 million to install an air conditioning system so people will come to rock concerts and touring Broadway shows during the summer. But that's exactly what Lynn's mayor, Judith Flanagan Kennedy, decided to do, betting that a cool Lynn Auditorium will bring tourists, Greater Boston residents, and potential investors to downtown Lynn.

"It will eventually pay for itself, and the good will and the exposure that we get from it really can't be calculated in dollars," said Kennedy.

Over the last six years, the auditorium has hosted about 50 events a year and

developed a niche by booking classic rock icons such as Peter Frampton, Pat Benatar, and Jethro Tull. Currently, the city makes around $100,000 a year on shows at the auditorium.

The 2,112-seat hall is typically closed from the spring until the fall. Kennedy said that will change this spring, when the new air conditioning system is installed. She hopes this leads to an increase in the number of events, with the idea of eventually holding two or three shows a week at the auditorium.

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Kennedy thinks the investment will help rebrand downtown Lynn, which, since the shoe factories and department stores left decades ago, has struggled to find an economic anchor. She believes that art and music will breathe new life into the area. Over the past decade, around 300 condos have been built in old factories, and many are occupied by artists and musicians who commute to Boston. Earlier this year, Central Square was designated as part of one of the first cultural districts by the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

James Marsh, Lynn's community development director, is the general manager of Lynn Auditorium, located in City Hall. He was the chief of staff for then-mayor Edward J. Clancy Jr. and has worked for the city since 2002.

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"It's not only bringing cultural artistic entertainment to downtown Lynn, it's the economic spin-off that's so important to the downtown," he said of the auditorium. "It's a big piece of the revitalization of the downtown."

Though not all of the major concert and theatrical venues north of Boston have used their success to boost their host community's economy, a symbiotic relationship does exist. In Lowell, the city has used $4 million in profits from shows at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium to refurbish the 90-year-old, 2,800-seat hall. In Rockport, the town's economy — which depends almost entirely on tourism during the summer — was

boosted over two years ago when the $20 million Shalin Liu Performance Center opened. In Beverly, Mayor William Scanlon was pleased when the North Shore Music Theatre reopened two years ago after the former nonprofit that ran the theater in the round ran out of money.

The theater managers say the densely populated communities north of Boston and in Southern New Hampshire form a strong market that favors everything from touring Broadway musicals to genteel touring warhorses like Kenny Rogers. Keeping ticket and concession prices low — sometimes one-third of what a family might spend at a Boston venue — is their goal.

"It's a good market, a heavily populated market, and a good theater market," said Bill Hanney, who bought the 1,500-seat North Shore Music Theatre and reopened it in July 2010.

Hanney said he was able to make the theater profitable by hiring nine employees, down from the 88 full-time staff that previously worked at the theater when it was a nonprofit. Hanney says his main goal is producing quality shows.

While the theater books musical and comedy acts such as Engelbert Humperdinck and Bill Cosby, it continues to produce several musicals a year from scratch. Actors are cast in New York and come to Beverly, where a set is built for each show.

Hanney also is working to rebuild the theater's subscriptions to musicals, which once topped 25,000 people.

These days, there are 9,000 subscribers — a number that grew 38 percent this year.

For decades in downtown Rockport, a chamber music festival brought thousands each year into the downtown, and organizers dreamed of a larger hall to host the festival.

In 2010, their dream came true after the nonprofit raised $20 million and opened the near-acoustically perfect, 334-seat Shalin Liu Performance Center. Every seat has a clear view of the stage, which is flanked by a large window that looks out on the Atlantic.

The five-week Rockport Chamber Music Festival is still the highlight of the year, and featured Leon Fleisher, Jordi Savall, and Chris Botti in June and July. I

In addition, the nonprofit added a jazz festival this summer, where headliners Ellis

Marsalis and Ann Hampton Callaway performed. Judy Collins and Arlo Guthrie also performed on the Rockport stage this year.

Tony Beadle, the center's executive director, said since the venue is so small, ticket prices can only pay for about half of the hall's budget. The rest of the money, said Beadle, comes through fund-raising and gala events.

"If I had a 1,000-seat theater, the need might not be as pressing," said Beadle, who is confident that the center will break even or make a little money this year.

In Lowell, Mill City Management has run the Lowell Memorial Auditorium since 1995. The city gives Mill City $300,000 annually, and receives 60 percent of profits that are generated.

About $4 million over the last 17 years has been placed in a capital improvement account to maintain the building.

Tom McKay, one of Mill City's owners, said he tries to book around 250 events a year, ranging from touring Broadway musicals and the Holiday Pops featuring Keith Lockhart and the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra to the New England Golden Gloves boxing championships and Theresa Caputo, a psychic.

The auditorium is also known for its acoustics: James Taylor, the Kinks, and the Boys Choir of Harlem all have recorded in the Lowell hall; Bruce Springsteen chose to come to Lowell on a solo tour in 1996.

McKay also said keeping the venue booked and prices low are keys to making the business viable.

On any given week, Phish, Tony Bennett, or Lynyrd Skynyrd could be sandwiched in between a US naturalization ceremony, the Miss Massachusetts pageant, or a wrestling match.

"If people can see the same product that's intriguing, then why go into Boston when they can come to Lowell?" McKay said.

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