

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Witness Statement

The Youngstown Playhouse has the distinct privilege of being America's oldest, ongoing community theater! Begun as a small theatre group performing in an old Arlington Street barn on Youngstown, Ohio's north side the group thrived from the very beginning. During the World War II the group performed shows with all female casts due to the war effort and toured regularly to nearby military camps to entertain. The barn eventually burned to the ground and the Playhouse troupe moved to the old Ohio movie theater located on Market Street, just short of town. In 1959, the current facility was constructed almost entirely by volunteers resulting in a double venue (549 and 200 seats respectively). The Youngstown Playhouse has called 600 Playhouse Lane, just off Glenwood Avenue and near The Mill Creek Park its home to this date.

During the 1970's The Youngstown Playhouse could justifiably boast the largest subscription of any community theater, more than 5,000. It could also boast more performances than any other theater --- a full season of nine main stage and six arena shows! In the early seventies, Children's Civic Theater, previously formed by local benevolent groups, came under the Playhouse banner as Youth Theatre. It has thrived ever since; regularly playing to as many as 300,000 children and adults throughout a six show season.

In the last twenty years The Playhouse has extended a hand to the African American Community with many "theme" plays by major black playwrights. Recently, a community production of "Black Nativity" joined the holiday offering of "A Christmas Carol" giving the entire area a selection of two, multiethnic winter celebrations.

Now under new management, the organization looks forward to continuing a proud tradition that has survived, unbroken since that day in 1924 when someone suggested, "we oughta have a place to do plays!" Under Bob Vargo's direction, a new staff and board structure has been devised. A more efficient, streamlined operation in keeping with professional models has created a lean, effective operation process. The Playhouse board is also in the process of streamlining, redefining and including more representation from the rich, ethnic backgrounds to be found locally. One of Bob's strategies is to eventually provide as many as six venues; four indoor and two park performance areas and to offer them affordably for local, ethnic celebrations, plays, dances and the like. The Youth Theatre program is bursting at the seams but plans for the future include classroom additions and smaller venues to permit more youth offerings and new craft and performance classes.

Noticeably missing from the local formula is the valuable asset of urban parks; specifically in the downtown. Economic realities forced city fathers to curtail and or close public pools and parks over the last two decades. There are NO pocket parks in the downtown. The Millennium project would not only provide a spacious pocket park but a new outdoor performance venue as well. The current Playhouse site would include now vacant land for an additional performance park, twice the size of that in the downtown. These venues will function on a year round basis and provide performance points and venues critically needed but never available in the City of Youngstown.

Most important is the consideration that The Youngstown Playhouse's Millennium Cultural Cooperative Park and new performance venues will complete the economic development, Arts package for the downtown. For the first time in history, The Youngstown Playhouse, The Oakland Center for the Arts, The Victorian Players, The Edward W. Powers Auditorium of The Youngstown Symphony and the Youngstown State University's Theater Program will exist in a context within walking distance and in the case of the Oakland and Ballet Western Reserve common areas and connecting facilities are being considered.

Additional understandings are near completion with The Youngstown City Schools which will allow for classes and participation in the Playhouse programs resulting in academic credit for participants. Suburban school systems have also indicated an interest in such a symbiotic relationship.

In summary; the parks, the new and refurbished venues and the inner city location sites will strategically place the Millennium Cultural Cooperative Park in a position to meet the cultural, artistic and performance needs of the City of Youngstown and the entire area in a method and to an extent never envisioned previously.

Projected property development and use...

Current site at Playhouse Lane (see "[existing property](#)" footprint in Attachments)

- Renovate existing 549 seat (Main Stage) and 100 seat (Arena) to state of the art
- Expand auditorium approach and public facilities to bring the facility into compliance for handicapped accessibility
- Build classrooms on to the existing structure to allow for expanded Youth Theater offerings
- Landscape and build performance pad on property currently vacant, allowing for a new, outdoor venue to serve as many as 300.

New site in Downtown, Youngstown (see "[Downtown Youngstown Proposed Properties](#)" in Attachments)

- Renovate former State Theater into a 750 seat state of the art performance facility.
- Renovate attached properties to include office space, public space, rehearsal and storage space and the inclusion of a 250 seat experimental, state of the art theater.
- Create a pocket performance park adjacent to the Theater for year round, day long use by the community and the performance venues. This site will accommodate 150-200 and offer a performance pad for live entertainment. A sky bridge exits from the State Theater lobby and empties into the park; allowing audiences to use the area pre show and during intermissions.

The entire package, including renovation and remodeling of both sites is currently budgeted at \$20 Million. \$4 Million of that amount will be requested of the State of Ohio with the remaining \$4 - \$6 Million to be raised locally. The time frame is a realistic three to four years. A Lobbyist/Consultant already representing other local Arts organizations will promote the Millennium Cultural Cooperative Park at the state level and continue in that role once the Cooperative is in place. Special, participatory projects to finance walks, walls, fountains and other aesthetics are in the planning stage. When completed, the Cooperative will feature the first, extensive venues created in the city since the building of the original Playhouse in 1959.

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