

The Arts Center



Photo by F. BRIAN FERGUSON

Progress isn't always visible, but day by day John McClaugherty makes phone calls and knocks on doors, working toward a new performing arts

center. Groundbreaking for the downtown center should be in 1996, he expects.

Surveying John McClaugherty's possible dream

By Bob Schwarz

SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL

CAUGHT between its carlot past and its artsy future, the \$4 million lot between Broad and Brooks streets stands empty save for a few parked cars and a lot of hope.

Nine years have passed since that June 1985 day when Charleston civic leaders first unveiled plans for an arts center. An arts center would revitalize a downtown where storefronts stood empty after Charleston Town Center opened, they said.

The idea was that more than 10 arts groups would come under one roof, including all the biggies: the West Virginia Symphony, Sunrise Art Museum, Community Music Association, Charleston Ballet, Charleston Light Opera Guild and Kanawha Players.

A project this big takes time, but it is moving forward, says John McClaugherty, president of the West Virginia Symphony and chairman of the task force charged with building the center. He expects to start raising money in 1995, and to break ground in 1996 on a project whose estimated final cost now exceeds \$50 million.

Changes in plan

The project took one giant step forward in 1990, when the Clay Foundation plunked down \$4 million for a 4.1-acre lot that Team Chevrolet was using to sell cars. The Clay Foundation tore down the buildings and recently leased the lot to the city for two years at \$1 a

State of the Arts



An occasional series on the arts in West Virginia

year. For its dollar, the city can run a parking lot.

The original arts center plans in 1985 called for one new building downtown and the reuse of another two buildings downtown, emptied when J.C. Penney and Montgomery Ward left their Capitol Street and Summers Street locations for the new mall. A consultant put the price tag at \$32 million.

But AT&T turned the Penney building into a collection center, dashing that first scenario. Later, the Ward building became office space, too.

The proposed arts center slid east a few blocks, out of the commercial center and over toward the big hospital, CAMC's General Division, and the nearby medical office buildings. The new spot has an instant selling point. You'll be able to drop in from Interstate 64 right off the Broad Street exit, then after the concert dash right out onto the Brooks Street entrance ramp.

The would-be tenants — arts groups that would use such a center — did not

change much in the years since the first announcement. Then in the summer of 1993, the Kanawha County Public Library climbed aboard.

The library's main branch, cramped for space and deprived of parking on Capitol Street, needed a new home, and long-range plans didn't call for one until 2004. McClaugherty sensed an opportunity. No performing arts center in America had the local library.

Wedding the library to the arts center was a coup for McClaugherty, even skeptics concede. The library doors would open every day. Patrons would trickle in, and during the noon hour, the trickle would swell to a stream.

A library would help pay the heating

and lighting bills, with tax-supported dollars, no less. A library would also help pay a maintenance crew.

In the search for money, the library might also be the lever to pry open new doors. "Any time you increase the number of constituents, you increase support for the project," McClaugherty says.

Big dream, big dreamer

Even skeptics concede that if anyone can make the arts center happen, it is McClaugherty, the silver-haired lawyer in the bright ties and conservative business suits.

"You have to have a dream and you can't curtail it," McClaugherty said in an interview a few years back. "West

Virginians tend to downgrade what they can do. That's one problem I've never had."

A native of Princeton, where his father owned a men's clothing store, and then a graduate of Northwestern University and West Virginia University law school, McClaugherty, 63, has welded considerable personal ambition to a near-obsessive sense of civic mission.

Since 1950, no one had been president of the West Virginia Symphony more than two years. McClaugherty, managing partner at Jackson & Kelly, where he runs West Virginia's largest law firm, is starting his 13th year as symphony president.

Under McClaugherty, the Charleston Symphony Orchestra metamorphosed into the West Virginia Symphony, a group that suddenly played more concerts outside Charleston than in.

The arts center is McClaugherty's biggest dream yet. He wants to collect all the diverse cultural eggs and put them in one nest. "It is an ambitious and unique undertaking," he says.

What's to come

Take Sunrise Museum, for instance, whose leaders have been antsy to come down off the hill and shed the South Hills-only label. They want to shed the art museum-only label, too. As an art museum, Sunrise has lacked both a significant collection and sufficient wall space. The current Lee Savage retrospective — 60 paintings, most of them borrowed from collectors or the artist — takes up all available wall space.

Arts center features

Here are the highlights of John McClaugherty's grand vision for the proposed Charleston Arts Center.

★ A 2,500-seat hall for the West Virginia Symphony and traveling shows, and a 600-seat theater for the Kanawha Players, Charleston Light Opera Guild and the Charleston Ballet.

★ Offices for all the arts groups, which will tap into one powerful computer.

★ Teaching rooms, where Montclair String Quartet members will give string lessons.

★ Science and nature shops of the sort found in big malls. Fast-food restaurants such as McDonald's. The goal: convenience for school groups and families, plus rent money.

★ Perhaps more than one building — no decision has been made yet — connected by enclosed passageways.

★ A center rising upward instead of just outward, leaving ample room for grass and trees.

★ Parking on an adjoining parcel rather than the main site. "It would be a terrible waste to do otherwise," McClaugherty says.