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by Adam Stone

A nonprofit organization is pleading with Ossining village officials to support its plan to build an \$8 million, multipurpose performing arts center at 155 Main Street.

However, village trustees are resistant to lend their support to the project because the nonprofit cannot assure it would be able to raise the necessary funds to complete the project.

The Pleasantville-based nonprofit wants to develop a four-story building, which would include a 225-seat performing arts theater.

Mayor John Perillo and other board members say they already have a developer ready to purchase the land for a \$7 million project that would include both a commercial and residential component.

Their contention is if they throw their weight behind the performing arts center project, a developer prepared to put a shovel in the ground will walk away, and they run the risk of the nonprofit not being able to raise the necessary funds.

"Show us the money," Perillo repeatedly told representatives from the newly formed Hudson Arts Foundation at a highly contentious meeting last Thursday. "You can petition us to death, but I won't budge one bit. This is village-owned land. We want to throw the risk back on you."

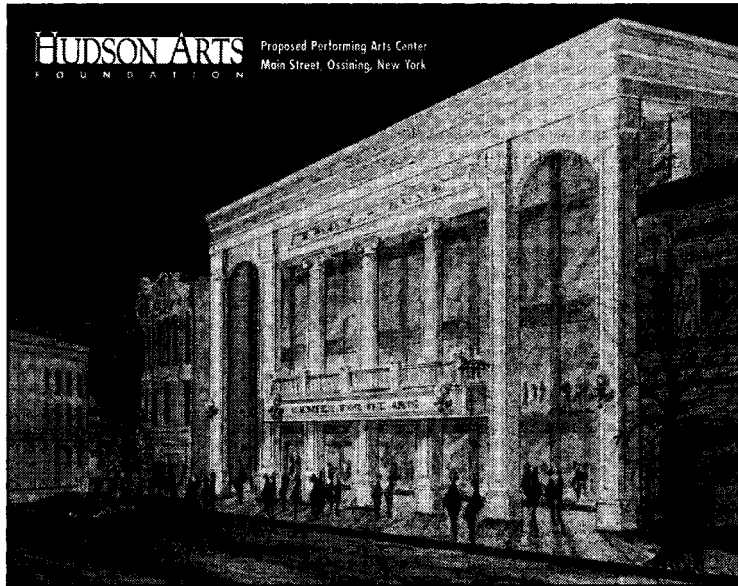
The organization has collected more than 600 signatures from residents from both in and outside of Ossining who support the project.

Perillo said he loves the concept of the project, but unless the principals of the nonprofit can raise a significant amount of money, the village will have to pass on the proposal.

The problem with that logic is donors would not shell out funds unless they were assured that the village supported the project, foundation principals Peter and Nick Stolatis said.

"You people are the ones who should be leading this," Peter Stolatis angrily told the board. "This is a magnet that will bring in dollars to Ossining. I can see by your faces that you don't support this."

Later, Perillo snapped, "Nobody crawls into my (mind)."



Artist's rendering of proposed performing arts center in Ossining.

The arts center would create a venue for small theater company programs, gallery and presentation space for local artists, and a foundation to sponsor scholarships for local students.

Other than the 225-seat theater, there would be two additional theaters/film screening rooms on the third level, 75- and 150-seat capacity each.

On the fourth floor, a conference facility has been proposed. A retail component would be included, which would allow the village to collect taxes.

The Stolatis brothers feel as if the mayor is stubbornly ignoring the wishes of the people.

"(Perillo) had issues with me and Nick and focused on that, and never got to our presentation," Peter Stolatis said. "It just shows that the mayor has an agenda. And him dismissing what 600-plus people have to say about this project should speak volumes on what he thinks of the community. It's very troubling."

The friction between organization officials and the board was heightened by roughly a dozen residents in attendance that came

in support of the project. They jeered and hissed Perillo on a number of occasions for remarks they viewed as dismissive and arrogant.

"This would be a tremendous gain financially," said young actress Jessica Hester of the Westchester 4th Wall Players.

On Thursday night, after Hester, who is also a local teacher, voiced some of her concerns to the board, Perillo told her the trustees were discussing "very adult business," suggesting the woman was too young to digest the nuances of the dialogue.

His comments drew boos from residents in attendance.

"I thought that was condescending and embarrassing," Peter Stolatis commented.

Hester, however, continued to lobby the board.

"The greatest risk would be to lose this opportunity," continued Hester.

She later commented in an e-mail, "The mayor brought up that there is a renewed sense of excitement about the downtown area. A performing arts center can only add to that excitement as it can pull in more individual commitment to Ossining's renewal."

Village officials fear the Hudson Arts Foundation might find itself in a situation where it cannot raise the necessary funds to construct the center.

"How would we explain that to the residents?" asked Trustee Anthony Parise, who owns Parise's steakhouse on Main Street in Ossining. "Look, this would double my business, so if anybody would be in favor of it, I would. But you're asking us to take a real risk."

The Hudson Arts Foundation has spent roughly \$150,000 on manpower and materials on the proposal to date, which underscores the argument it is taking this project seriously, Nick Stolatis said.

And residents supported Stolatis' contention the arts center would put Ossining on the map as a serious cultural destination.

One woman who said she had decades of experience in real estate said the center would be a major shot in the arm for the downtown and the greater Ossining community.

"Culture is needed in Ossining," said Rae Maligny of Coldwell Banker in Briarcliff. "If they lose the \$7 million, that just means the property is valuable. There will be other developers."

But the mayor said he couldn't take that chance.

"I don't have a crystal ball," Perillo said. "I'm listening to this project because we want to be courteous."

Trustees did say if the Stolatis brothers could come up with roughly \$1.5 million in the coming weeks, they would seriously entertain the project.

Gay Marglin said village officials are blowing the risk of losing the \$7 million commercial/residential project out of proportion. She added it would be foolish to pass up this opportunity.

"There's nowhere to shop in Ossining," she said. "We're paying a lot of taxes and getting nothing in return. I don't think it would be a risk. There is a lot of money out there."

"This would do a lot more for the village than a few stores," she said, referring to the \$7 million project that includes a residential component.

Anne Hile is the owner of Papillion 21 in Ossining and a mother of four.

"I think we have to think beyond logic and simple numbers and also consider the worth of laying the foundation for a legacy for our children," said Hile, who commended Perillo for being thorough.

What many residents view as a potential downtown linchpin seems to have little chance of coming to fruition.

"I don't think these guys can raise the money, period," said Trustee Miguel Hernandez, who was accused of unethical behavior by the Stolatis brothers in a separate project. "There is no track record."