

Fund-raising underway for Colfax events and performing arts center



Contributed renderings / Richland 44 School District Foundation and Zerr Berg Architects

This is an architect's rendering of an \$11 million events and performing arts center being planned for Colfax, North Dakota. If fundraising goes well, bidding and construction could start in 2023, a representative of the Richland 44 School District Foundation says.



An events and performing arts center in Colfax, North Dakota, would include an outdoor space to accommodate events and activities such as wedding photos.



Contributed / Richland 44 School District Foundation and Zerr Berg Architects

The event space of an Events and Performing Arts Center planned for Colfax, North Dakota, is designed to accommodate 350 people seated at round tables. Construction of the \$11 million facility could start in 2023 if fund-raising goes well, a Richland 44 School District Foundation representative says.

BY HELMUT SCHMIDT – THE FORUM

Colfax, N.D.

Fundraising is underway to build a performing arts and events center that Richland 44 School District residents hope will be an economic boon for the area and a theater and musical arts gem on the prairie.

If all goes well, groundbreaking on the \$11 million project could begin in the coming year, says Megan Kummer, chairwoman of the Richland 44 School District Foundation board of directors.

About half of the project cost – \$5.5 million – has been set aside specifically for the Events and Performing Arts Center (EPAC) from settlement funds the

Richland Wilkin Joint Powers Authority received to allow construction of a Red River diversion around Fargo–Moorhead.

To tap that pool of cash, the foundation has agreed to kick in \$2 million in matching funds, Kummer said Friday, Dec. 16.

The remainder of the project’s costs must be raised from individuals, families or businesses, or covered by loans, Kummer said.

About \$525,000 was raised through early contributions and an auction at a “Diamond on the Prairie” black-tie fundraising event held in early December in Christine.

“We’re excited, but we still have some work to do,” Kummer said. “It’s important for people to know what’s happened, and where we’re at ... and know that this is an actual thing that has a place. I mean if we can start building next year, we will,” she said.

More of the fundraising gap must be filled before soliciting bids for EPAC.

There is an effort to get 44 donors to give \$44,000 apiece, which could raise nearly \$2 million, Kummer said. And “we still have naming rights on the table” for a large donor.

Justin Neppl, executive director for the Southern Valley Economic Development Authority, says the project should spur growth in northern Richland County. “This is a great way for the community of Colfax to position themselves to be attractive to (people) who might have jobs in Fargo–Moorhead,” but want to live in a rural setting, Neppl said. “It’s a great project for the northern part of our county.”

An amazing gift

Richland 44 includes the communities of Colfax (where the high school is located), Abercrombie (where the elementary school is located), Galschutt and Christine and the surrounding farm and ranch lands.

The community put together a group to decide what they wanted the arts and events center to look like. They’re also working with Zerr Berg Architects of Fargo.

“What are our hopes and dreams, because \$5.5 million isn’t going to build the whole thing, right? We wanted to build it for the future and have that be an investment into everything we could possibly want out of this project, and not just hamstringing ourselves,” Kummer said.

The planning group came up with a facility of nearly 26,000 square feet, not including parking.

The EPAC will have an event space that can seat 350 people at round tables, and an outdoor space for wedding photos and other activities. The theater and concert space will have 572 seats. In addition, the flat floor in the theater can be converted to 5,000 square feet of usable space for events, Kummer said.

The question of where to put the center was solved by the generosity of Inis Kay and Tom Frankl, who donated 17.5 acres of land, “a prime piece of real estate,” on the north side of County Road 4 entering Colfax, close to the school, Kummer said.

“An amazing gift” for its location, with a lot of pluses in terms of safety, access to infrastructure and visibility. “We’re really fortunate,” she said.

Nathan Berseth, president of the Richland 44 School Board, says the events and performing arts center will be a fine facility for the school district’s arts programs, and an attractive amenity for the community.

Renting the facility for events should be a good revenue source for the foundation and its work providing scholarships and funding staff and district initiatives, Berseth said.

“I think it is an exciting opportunity for a town of 250 people and a school district of under 350 students to have this type of venue for our children,” Berseth said.

The foundation’s role

The school district can’t own or operate the EPAC, but the nonprofit foundation can, Kummer said.

The foundation is relatively new. It was set up because Darrel Hendrickson, a Colfax-area farmer, bequeathed \$4.5 million in his will to be used for scholarships for Richland 44 students.

That gift was announced in late 2018 and the foundation created not long after to administer the gift. The foundation also raises money and helps fund programs for students and staff.

Because of Hendrickson’s gift, every Richland 44 High School graduate who attends the district three of the last four years of their education is eligible for \$10,000 in scholarship funds usable toward postsecondary education, such as attending a college, university or trade school to obtain degrees or

certifications, Kummer said.

The foundation has committed \$2 million toward the arts and events center, though it has not been determined what part of that will come from fundraising, a loan, or perhaps earnings from the Hendrickson donation, Kummer said.

“We’ll see how fundraising goes,” Kummer said. “We’d prefer just to do all the fundraising on the front end (to pay for the project) and be done with it.”

The success of fundraising will also determine when bids can be solicited and construction started, she said.

“Everybody feels very optimistic about our ability to rent out the space, so we feel pretty optimistic about our ability to make money on it” to pay off any loans, Kummer said.

Neppl, of the Southern Valley EDA, says building an arts and events center may give Richland 44 a unique advantage over other small school districts, which often plow funding into athletic facilities rather than upgrading music or theater venues.

Most communities “whenever they do a project that’s significant like this, they’re generally doing some sort of sports venue. But these guys took a much different approach that’s unique and creative and I think that will set them apart,” Nepple said. This may attract people to live in the Richland 44 district “because of how they approached this,” he said.

A separate performing arts and events center will remove the competition for space that occurs when smaller schools have to juggle programming time in their gyms for basketball and volleyball games, along with concerts, plays and other events.

“I think it will just pay volumes (in the) long term for that,” Neppl said.

Kimmer agrees.

“We’re like a lot of small schools, we don’t have any space,” Kummer says.

Moving concerts and plays from packed gymnasiums to purposebuilt spaces for music and stage productions will improve students’ educational experiences and audience enjoyment, she said.

“Being able to use an event space that actually has acoustics and microphones, and state-of-the-art speakers and stuff like that, will be just

something that supplements our kids' education," Kummer said.

The EPAC was envisioned in the diversion settlement as a way to help the Richland 44 School District draw new residents and revitalize the area's economy.

Kummer says it's a good bet.

"I think we've got a good thing going in Colfax and Abercrombie with new residential home builds," she said.

The performing arts and events center will make Richland 44 even more attractive, she said.

"We see the possibilities as being endless at this point," Kummer said.

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