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## Thalia Mara Needs \$3 Million in Upgrades: Consulting Firm

By Brian Eason

A consulting firm told the Jackson City Council this afternoon that Thalia Mara Hall will need as much as \$3 million in upgrades to avoid losing events and revenue in the coming years.

The hall, which operates at an annual \$250,000 deficit now, could be losing \$300,000 per year by 2017 if upgrades aren't made, said Ryan Conway, a consultant with Brailsford and Dunlavey, whom the city paid to study the feasibility of such upgrades.

Proposed upgrades include a new heating and air conditioning system, revamped seating and new lighting for shows.

Conway said it is normal for venues like Thalia Mara to operate at a deficit, but it is still underperforming. He said Thalia Mara could support 21 more shows per year and 25,000 more visitors, which would bring its needed subsidy down to \$135,000 per year.

Conway said \$2.3 million to \$3 million in upgrades are "the minimum that really needs to be done to the building. But with that, you'll protect your current events and you'll improve your revenue stream through concessions."

A new concession stand could bring in \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year, he said.

The Thalia Mara study was part of a larger \$109,500 effort to study the feasibility of an arena in downtown Jackson. The arena feasibility study is not yet complete.

Mayor Harvey Johnson Jr. said the Thalia Mara portion of the study did what it was supposed to do.

"The whole idea was to justify, if you will, the expenditure to update," Johnson said. "I think that this assessment does that."

Johnson said Thalia Mara is a necessary venue for Jackson events, alongside larger ones like the Mississippi Coliseum. Events like the International Ballet Competition and Broadway shows, he said, need a venue like Thalia Mara.

"I think it was a good exercise to get this done, and I think it does give fodder to individuals who want to get this done in a capital campaign in the private sector," Johnson said.

Consultants provided three scenarios for the continued operation of Thalia Mara — the status quo, having a private management company take over and hiring a marketing specialist.

Johnson said he hasn't decided which suggestion to push forward.

"Obviously, we want to minimize the deficit, knowing that there is going to be one," Johnson said. But he added that the city also needs to maintain "appropriate control over a public facility."