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Talking Thalia Mara Upgrades

By Jacob Fuller

JACKSON — A program management firm has studied Thalia Mara Hall and is recommending the city make some major upgrades to the theater and hire an events manager. The city could lose the International Ballet Competition unless it upgrades the facility.

Brailsford and Dunlavey of Washington, D.C., did a preliminary economic-development study of Thalia Mara Hall to find its potential for growth. Ryan Conway, assistant project manager, said Thalia Mara needs at least \$2.3 million to \$3 million in upgrades in the first stage of development.

This first phase of upgrades would include new lighting, exterior signage, a marquee, new seating, air conditioning upgrades and renovated concession areas. Conway said the seating improvements would not add any additional seating to the 2,400-seat venue.

Thalia Mara Hall hosts about 68 shows in 100 event days and attracts more than 100,000 people every year. The facility's costs exceed its revenues. The average annual deficit for Thalia Mara Hall is \$250,000.

"I think it's important to note here that typically, these facilities, performing arts facilities, do operate at a deficit," Conway told the Jackson City Council Aug. 6.

The goal of renovating Thalia Mara would be to maximize its use and minimize its operational deficit.

Conway said if the city made the suggested upgrades and hired a private managing company for the venue, or assigned an in-house staff dedicated to managing the facility, it could see an increase of up to 21 shows and 25,000 visitors per year.

Upgrades could also mean a reducing the utility costs for the facility up to 25 percent, Conway said.

Conway also suggested that the city begin charging a ticket fee of up to \$1 added to each ticket price for each show at Thalia Mara Hall. The city already charges a similar fee of about \$1.50 for events at the Jackson Convention Center.

For its study, Brailsford and Dunlavey came up with these scenarios for Thalia Mara Hall, all of which include the building upgrades: one in which no change is made to management, another in

which the city hires a private management company, and a third in which the city will hire an in-house manager for the building.

If the city hires a private management firm, Conway said the company could help reroute touring acts coming to nearby cities to Thalia Mara Hall. This could bring the facility's yearly shows total up to 90 and cut the \$250,000 deficit in half.

In the third scenario, Conway said the city would need to make sure they hire someone who is qualified to manage a performing-arts facility. He predicted that an in-house manager could bring the annual show total up to about 85 shows per year and cut the deficit by \$120,000.

Later phases of improvements to the facility would include new restrooms and Americans with Disabilities Act-compliance upgrades in phase two. Phase three would include new stage rigging, back-stage support and image improvements.

The council and Mayor Harvey Johnson Jr. will review Brailsford and Dunlavey's assessments before making decisions for the future of Thalia Mara Hall.

The city ordered the study in January after they received news that the USA International Ballet Competition, the facility's premier event held every 4 years, may look for a new venue if the city does not upgrade the hall.