

A&P Commission pledges \$500,000 to UA concert hall

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Monday, December 10, 2012 · [19 comments](#)



University of Arkansas Chancellor G. David Gearhart speaks to members of the Fayetteville Advertising and Promotion Commission Monday afternoon inside a conference room at the Fayetteville Town Center.

Photo: Todd Gill, Flyer staff

Members of the Fayetteville Advertising and Promotion Commission on Monday voted to contribute \$500,000 to the University of Arkansas to help with construction costs of a planned 700-seat [performing arts hall](#).

UA Chancellor G. David Gearhart in July [asked the commission for \\$1 million](#) to put toward the estimated \$17 million project.



UA officials plan to renovate the Old Field House building into a state-of-the-art concert hall.

Photo: Todd Gill

Had commissioners agreed to that original request, it would've been the largest single contribution ever made to a special project. In 2003, the commission put \$500,000 toward a \$1 million project to revitalize the Fayetteville downtown square. The group last year agreed to a half-million-dollar pledge to the Walton Arts Center to renovate the Arkansas Music Pavilion, but that money [was not donated](#) since the project never came to fruition.

Commissioner Hannah Mills questioned whether the commission would benefit directly from helping build the new concert hall. "I'm not sure I can justify a \$1 million donation for something I'm not sure is going to put heads in beds," said Mills.

The group has been using hospitality tax dollars to draw visitors to Fayetteville since it was created in March 1977.



Renderings, from Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects, show the interior of a planned 700-seat performing arts hall to be built inside the old Field House building on the University of Arkansas campus.

Staff photo, courtesy images

Gearhart reminded commissioners that the new facility would allow the university to host approximately 40 large ensemble performances each year that could result in a major boost in visitors to the city.

The UA's Center for Business and Economic Research estimates an annual attendance of 28,000 people during those 40 events which would account for an increase of at least \$298,000 and up to \$1.9 million in visitor spending each year.

"We do believe it will bring more people into Fayetteville and more money into Fayetteville," Gearhart said. "We think there's no question about that."

Gearhart said the venue would also be made available to Fayetteville as an additional facility for hosting events not directly affiliated with the university, when scheduling allows.

Commissioner Justin Tennant, who also serves as an alderman in Ward 3, called Gearhart's request a "very unique ask."

"Is there really going to be a return on investment when you look at just the building by itself?" asked Tennant. "My first reaction is no. I don't think there's specific enough things about it to say, 'absolutely.'"



Jim and Joyce Faulkner (right) recently committed \$6 million to the project.

Photo: Todd Gill

Tennant, however, said in looking from a macro level at what the university brings to city, he believed a contribution of some kind was in order.

Tax figures have shown that the university has a significant annual impact on the city's economy. Razorback home football games last year are estimated to have brought in \$49,526,694 and the UA campus food service provider Chartwell's is the largest single HMR tax contributor.

"I think that we need to be responsive to our stakeholders who have a direct impact on our ongoing economy," said commissioner (and Ward 3 alderman) Bobby Ferrell. "This stakeholder here is the largest economic driver in this community. That affects the arts, it affects business, it affects government, it affects everything."

Marilyn Heifner said she felt a \$500,000 contribution would be more appropriate, and would leave more money for other potential projects including an expected request from the Walton Arts Center for help with [a planned expansion](#) of the center's Dickson Street campus.

The group voted unanimously to approve a half-million-dollar pledge. The money will come from nearly \$2 million in A&P reserves and will be given in two \$250,000 payments next year.

Gearhart thanked the group and said construction of the hall is scheduled to begin in August 2013. He said he expected the work to take about 18 months to complete.