

Norfolk seeks end to arts groups' free rent at venues

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NORFOLK

The city's three largest arts groups will slowly be weaned off public subsidies that have given them free rent for the past three years.

The rent and other expenses, such as staffing and security for concerts and plays, have cost the city \$1.2 million, John Rhamstine, who runs Norfolk's seven arts and sports venues, told the City Council last week.

He asked the council for permission to begin charging the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, Virginia Stage Company and Virginia Opera rent again. However, he recommended that the city continue the subsidy for one more year and then gradually phase in rent fees.

For example, the groups would be charged 25 percent of their actual rent costs next year. In 2010, they'd pay 75 percent and by 2011, full rent costs.

The council, which informally approved Rhamstine's proposal, also learned that Norfolk spends about \$20 per resident on the arts, nearly four times the amount spent per capita on arts by any other South Hampton Roads city.

The council's endorsement comes during a tough budget year for the city. City Manager Regina V.K. Williams has implemented a hiring freeze and recommended significant cuts to many departments' budgets and modest employee raises in her proposal for next fiscal year's operating costs.

Many council members said this week that helping the arts provides far more to the city than it costs. City leaders agreed to waive the rent when they learned of the groups' financial woes.

The arts are a quality-of-life issue, Councilwoman Theresa Whibley said.

"What would happen to the city if all of these venues went dark?" Councilman Don Williams asked. "It would hurt our budget bottom line."

In return for waived rent, the groups have given free performances and provided thousands of free tickets to local organizations, Rhamstine said.

"We are the arts center for this region," Mayor Paul Fraim said.

Norfolk has the 2,500-seat Chrysler Hall, which is the region's largest theater venue, Fraim said. The city also has the 1,600-seat Harrison Opera House, the 600-seat Wells Theater

and the 620-seat Attucks Theatre. The 900-seat Jeanne and George Roper Performing Arts Center, also downtown, is owned by Tidewater Community College.

The venues generate millions of dollars from parking fees, admission, restaurant, sales and hotel taxes, Fraim said.

The Virginia Stage Company brought in \$700,000 in direct revenues to the city last year, Keith Stava, who manages the organization, said. Overall, the company created more than \$5 million worth of spending downtown, he said.

Stava said he agrees that it's time for his organization to begin paying rent.

While the arts have rebounded financially, cuts in state support and increased fundraising competition means the groups are not out of the woods, Rhamstine said.

"We will make it work," Stava said.

Carla Johnson, director of the symphony, said she appreciates the city's support.

"We knew free rent wouldn't last forever," she said.

The majority of the roughly \$4.7 million the city spends on the arts goes to the Chrysler Museum, Rhamstine said. While the Chrysler gets \$2.8 million, about \$650,000 goes to the Virginia Arts Festival. About 1.2 million is awarded in grants.

If contributions to the capital campaigns of art organizations are included, the \$19.96 cents per person the city provides would rise to \$29.94 per person. The figure also does not take into account the millions of dollars the city spends subsidizing venues such as Nauticus.

This year, Virginia Beach plans to spend \$2.2 million on the arts, or \$5.11 per person, city spokesman Marc Davis said.

That figure does not include the additional \$7.2 million the city provides to the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center.

Portsmouth spends \$2.79 per resident. Chesapeake sets aside 44 cents per resident and Suffolk spends 23 cents, according to Rhamstine, who said he culled the other cities' budgets for information on their arts spending.

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By comparison

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Suffolk spends 23 cents per resident.

Sources: the cities of Norfolk and Virginia Beach