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LOCAL

Arts groups face severe budget cuts

County Legislature's fiscal ax threatens Syracuse Opera, Syracuse Stage, many others.

By James T. Mulder
Staff writer

Without funding from Onondaga County:

Syracuse Opera singers might have just two pianists, instead of a full orchestra, backing them up.

The Cultural Resources Council might have to pull the plug on "The Adventures of Rudolph," a ballet that has been an annual children's holiday tradition in Syracuse for more than 30 years.

And Syracuse Stage might be forced to cut some of its theater and art outreach programs that serve about 30,000 students annually.

Leaders of local arts and cultural groups say those are some of the po-

tential consequences of deep cuts in county funding recommended by the Onondaga County Legislature's Ways & Means Committee. To avoid major property tax increases in many of the county's 19 towns, the committee is recommending \$45.5 million in changes to County Executive Joanie Mahoney's proposed \$1.2 billion budget for 2011. The Legislature is expected to vote Tuesday on the amended budget.

One of the changes calls for the elimination of funding to 11 arts and cultural groups, and reductions in funding to five other groups. The cuts total \$387,252.

"I think it sends a very negative message in a county budget of \$1.2 billion that they cannot find the funds to support arts and cultural organizations," said Jeffrey Woodward, managing director of Syracuse Stage, which stands to lose its entire appropriation of \$25,580. "The cuts amount to

a paper clip in the county budget."

The committee also wants to eliminate funding for the Red House Arts Center; Salt City Center for the Performing Arts; CNY Jazz Arts Foundation; Syracuse International Film & Video Festival; Syracuse City Ballet; the Skaneateles Festival; FOCUS 20/20; and Leadership Greater Syracuse. Although the last two groups are civic groups, their funding appears in the same part of the county budget as the arts and cultural groups.

The nonprofit groups say some legislators are telling them not to worry because there is another pot of money available to them at the Cultural Resources Trust — CRT, for short — an independent public benefit corporation the county created last year.

The trust issues bonds for nonprofits like hospitals and colleges. The fees it earns for doing that are set aside to support arts and cultural groups. The Legislature has no authority over the

CRT and its use of funds. The trust is run by a five-person board appointed by Mahoney.

James Rhinehart, chairman of the Ways & Means Committee, said the CRT was designed to "... remove these organizations from the public dole, and have their own funding stream from the private sector."

But Mahoney's appointee who oversees the CRT said the trust was never intended to be the source of ongoing operating funds for arts groups and is not in a position to pick up the slack created by the proposed county cuts.

Thomas Dadey Jr., who chairs CRT, said money from the trust is supposed to be used to help groups with programming and capital projects.

"We don't want this money to go to pay an executive director's salary," he said.

CRT earned \$700,000 issuing bonds

County funding loss could affect donations

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for Syracuse University. It has given out about \$140,000 in grants to the Syracuse Jazz Fest, Syracuse Opera, Syracuse Stage, Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Woods and other organizations. It has about \$500,000 in its account and no bonding projects on the horizon to generate additional revenue, Dadey said.

"We don't know what our revenues could be from year to year," he said.

Meanwhile, the nonprofits are trying to figure out how they will manage without county money.

Syracuse Opera may not be able to afford to hire the SSO to accompany its singers in two of its three performances this season, said Catherine Wolff, the group's general and artistic director. Syracuse Opera spends more than \$100,000 per season to have the SSO play in its productions.

If the county money does

On the block

Funding would be eliminated for these groups:

Red House Arts Center, \$15,000

Cultural Resources Council, \$60,087

Syracuse Stage, \$25,580

Syracuse Opera, \$61,467

Salt City Center for the Performing Arts, \$11,246

CNY Jazz Arts Foundation, \$8,000

Leadership Greater Syracuse, \$9,400

FOCUS Greater Syracuse, \$9,400

Syracuse International Film & Video Fest, \$22,000

Syracuse City Ballet, \$3,200

Skaneateles Festival, \$5,640

These groups would see their funding reduced by the following amounts:

YMCA of Greater Syracuse, \$2,256 (-10 percent)

Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, \$20,535 (-5 percent)

Museum of Science and Technology, \$13,836 (-10 percent)

Onondaga Historical Association, \$11,221 (-10 percent)

Erie Canal Museum, \$5,487 (-10 percent)

not come through, Syracuse Opera will try to replace the SSO with a university orchestra or just use two pianists for accompaniment, Wolff said.

"It's not something our audience wants us to do," she said.

The loss of county funding also makes it harder to raise money from other sources,

according to Woodward of Syracuse Stage.

That's because many foundations, corporations and other potential donors assume a lack of public funding means an organization is not financially viable or fulfilling its mission.

The Red House, an arts and cultural center in Armory Square, is slated to receive

\$15,000 in county funding for the first time in the 2011 budget.

"We were incredibly excited to finally be put in the county executive's budget, then to have that stripped away is demoralizing," said Mike Intaglietta, administrative director of the Red House.

He and other leaders of arts and cultural groups said their industry creates jobs, generates revenues for restaurants and hotels and makes Syracuse a more attractive community for companies and employees looking for a place to relocate.

Wolff, of Syracuse Opera, said her organization has already eliminated jobs and cut its operating budget because of the recession.

"We've been very responsible and forward thinking about what we had to do to get through the difficult times," she said. "There's not any fat left, which is why we're having to look at more drastic choices."

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