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Developer has sights set on another site for ASO hall

Wieland: Tear down Memorial Arts Building to make room for symphony center

By Aisha I. Jefferson, Staff Reporter

DEVELOPER JOHN WIELAND has given millions to the High Museum in the past, but so far, he hasn't offered financial support to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's proposed new hall.

And there's a reason: He doesn't like the proposed 14th Street location, across the street from the Woodruff Arts Center campus. Wieland, who is developing luxury condos and retail on Peachtree Street near the arts center, said he thinks he speaks for other wealthy arts patrons who are holding back on their donations for the new venue.

"Mostly everybody wants to move [it] from 14th Street," he said. "They may not admit it."

Wieland said the best option for the ASO is to stay right where it is. He would tear down the Memorial Arts Building, which houses the ASO and Alliance Theatre, and rebuild on the site.

"Personally, I would rebuild the theater as a separate building, tear down the Memorial Arts Building and rebuild the symphony hall. Everything would be on the same campus. I would sell 14th Street and take the money," said Wieland.

Though Wieland isn't yet a contributor to the new ASO hall, his opinion carries weight. He's a former trustee of the Woodruff Arts Center, a former chair of the High Museum and still serves on the museum's board. He's given at least \$12 million to the museum, where a wing bears his name.

Wieland added that the ASO wouldn't be homeless during the two years of construction. He suggested it could find a temporary home in the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, which is set to open next fall.

Current plans call for the new ASO hall to be built on a 3.8-acre site on 14th Street, slightly off Peachtree Street, a location that is across the street from the Woodruff Arts Center.

Joe Bankoff, president and chief executive officer of the Woodruff Arts Center, which operates the symphony, declined to comment on the feasibility of Wieland's idea.

"The plan right now is on 14th Street. There's been no plan to move it," said Bankoff, who in an interview with the Daily Report published Oct. 17, suggested that sites other than 14th Street could be considered.

In a memo Bankoff sent to trustees of the Woodruff Arts Center on Monday, Bankoff wrote, "The location on 14th Street was selected as the best positioning after examining other options then available."

The 14th Street location is in the shadow of the new 1180 Peachtree tower, home to symphony benefactor King &

Spalding, which has pledged \$2.5 million toward construction of the new hall.

Chilton D. Varner, a partner at King & Spalding and ASO board member, said she has heard nobody “voice any dissatisfaction to me [about the 14th Street location].”

“I personally think it is a great site,” Varner said.

Fellow ASO board member Ben F. Johnson, managing partner with Alston & Bird, which also has pledged \$2.5 million, said he doesn’t see any problem with the 14th Street site.

“What is a better piece of property than on 14th Street between two signature office buildings, within 50 yards from the Arts Center and right across from the Four Seasons?” Johnson said.

Johnson added that he has “not heard of a single person who said ‘I would be delighted to give you \$50 million if it were on another site.’”

So far, \$111 million has been raised toward the \$300 million fund-raising goal. The ASO hopes to move into its new hall in 2014.

In addition to money from King & Spalding and Alston & Bird, other donations include \$10 million from Coca-Cola Co., \$5 million from SunTrust Bank, and a \$35 million pledge from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation.

But Wieland contends that the fundraising would go faster with a different site. “The difficulty in raising money is confirmation that 14th Street doesn’t work,” he said, explaining that the physical proximity of cultural venues on arts campuses such as the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York are part of what makes them work so well.

“All of the institutions share the same kind of open space ... You get this vibrancy of people coming and going,” Wieland said. “You wouldn’t get that interaction with [the] symphony on 14th Street.”

The Woodruff Arts Center campus includes the Atlanta College of Art, the Alliance Theatre, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the High Museum of Art. Built in memory of 106 Atlanta art patrons who died in a plane crash on the way from Paris in 1962, the 38-year-old Memorial Arts Building is in the middle of renovations, but its acoustics are widely considered to lack the quality of modern concert halls.

Wieland and his wife, Sue, donated \$12 million in 2003 to the High Museum of Arts expansion. The museum named one of its three new buildings the Wieland Pavilion.

In March, Wieland signed a contract to purchase three properties, 1285, 1293 and 1307 Peachtree Street, directly across from the Woodruff Arts Center to develop 1 Museum Place, a mid-rise to include luxury condominiums and ground level retail. The property also will have a 15,000-square-foot art gallery.

Although the Atlanta Symphony Center has been projected to generate billions of dollars annually for the City of Atlanta and the State of Georgia, no money has been included in either government’s budget for the venue.

Heather Hedrick, spokeswoman for Gov. Sonny Perdue, said Perdue is looking for a partnership between the private sector and the arts community. “At the appropriate time he will determine if there are state funds available to supplement that partnership,” Hedrick said.

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