

The San Diego
Union-Tribune.

Stuck in the wings

North Coast Repertory Theatre's future put on hold in development squabble

By Anne Marie Welsh
THEATER CRITIC

March 12, 2007

What happens to a dream deferred?

Might it “dry up like a raisin in the sun,” as Harlem poet Langston Hughes asked, or maybe just sag “like a heavy load. Or does it explode?”

In the case of North Coast Repertory Theatre, delays to its long-promised new theater project could cost the 25-year-old theater company its ambitious artistic director, David Ellenstein – and maybe its future.

“When I was hired, I had two primary agenda items that the board signed onto,” said Ellenstein, an accomplished actor and director. “The first was to take the theater to being fully equity, a professional-quality company. And the second was to build a venue to support that quality. The two are inextricably linked.”

Ellenstein, whose second contract with the theater extends through August 2008, has made the theater fully professional. His second goal, however, is imperiled. And without approval of the project, he has indicated he would likely go elsewhere.

NCRT has been wedged since its modest beginnings in nooks

and crannies of a Solana Beach strip mall, the Lomas Santa Fe Plaza. Artistically, the operation has grown in the scope and professionalism of its productions nonetheless.

But for its 25th anniversary this year, the company has received an unwelcome surprise gift from the seaside city that once courted its presence – a series of delays to its dream of an adequate theater, production and education facility. Like a lover seduced then put off, members of the North Coast Rep staff and board of directors are stunned and disheartened by the delays. “Their strategy seems to be death by infinite delay, and they haven't got a case because (the project) complies in every particular,” said Jay Sarno, the NCRT board member in charge of planning.



CRISSY PASCUAL / Union-Tribune
NCRT's new theater complex will be part of Cedros Crossing, a mixed-use development that will replace a vast parking lot adjacent to the Solana Beach train station.



JVSA Architects

“They” is a new cast of City Council members and a vocal cadre of residents opposed to Cedros Crossing, the redevelopment project on North County Transit District land, of which the new theater will be an essential part.

The City Council considered the final environmental impact report at a public hearing Saturday; another is scheduled for March 24, with potential spillover on March 31. Still, in an area where *mañana* rules and some developers have given any kind of near-coastal growth a bad name, North Coast Rep is now at the mercy of a city battling over its own identity.

North Coast Repertory Theatre timeline:

ACTUAL:

2003: North Coast Repertory Theatre considers relocating from a Lomas Santa Fe shopping mall in Solana Beach to a new facility proposed by the city of Encinitas.

2004: The Solana Beach City Council asks Greg Shannon, lead developer of Cedros Crossing, to work with the theater to provide a new facility on land owned by North County Transit District adjacent to the train station.

2005: The city of Solana Beach resolves to keep North Coast Rep in Solana Beach and allots \$10,000 toward preliminary plans. A draft of the environmental impact report was expected in July with a final report projected for November of that year.

2006: The delayed draft of the environmental impact report on Cedros Crossing is submitted in June for public comment. Concerns include heavy traffic congestion requiring improvements such as left-turn lane from southbound North Coast Highway 101 and Lomas Santa Fe Drive. The report also indicates the new theater could create parking problems and may have to restrict ticket sales for its Sunday matinee performance.

2007: Eight months after it was initially scheduled and after an election brings new council members on board, public hearings on the final environmental impact report are held March 10. Another hearing is set for March 24.

PROJECTED:

2007: Coastal Commission Hearings could come six months after city approval of the environmental report and the plan itself – developer Greg Shannon and Mayor Lesa Heeber both predict “optimistically” in November.
2008: Groundbreaking for a 900-space parking garage to be built by the North County Transit District; half the spaces will be reserved for train and theater patrons.

2009: Theater and project construction will begin with completion of the garage, possibly in June.

2010: Theater completed.

2011: Cedros Crossing residential, retail and entertainment complex completed.

– ANNE MARIE WELSH

Sarno said that for NCRT “it's either grow or die and we have not been able to locate any other suitable site in Solana Beach. Our future is in jeopardy.”

The new mayor of Solana Beach, Lesa Heebner, contends that the delays stem from her attempt to balance competing interests. “I don't know anybody – well, maybe three people – who oppose the theater being in this particular project. We're all excited about the vibrancy it can bring as an extension of our South Cedros design district,” Heebner said, referring to the busy blocks of shops, galleries, restaurants and clubs nearby.

“But there are impacts because of the shared parking,” Heebner said, pointing to the once-a-week matinee, on Sunday, when theater and Solana Beach train station patrons might be sharing their 524-space portion of a proposed underground parking garage.

“Traffic, parking and aesthetics – as well as air quality – are the issues,” she said. “My job is to mitigate the negative impacts in the neighborhood. There are constituents we will be hearing from worried about theater patrons parking on the street or blocking their driveways.”

NCRT's new theater complex, a plan much revised after community input last year, will be located at the heart of Cedros Crossing, a large mixed-use development that will replace a vast parking lot – six football fields long – adjacent to the Solana Beach train station.

As early as June of 2003, when incoming NCRT artistic director Ellenstein was first in town, he and the board discussed plans for expanding the theater out of its 194-seat space to a site that could also accommodate its scene, prop and costume shops (now in Carlsbad), and its multifaceted education programs.

Solana Beach had already stirred the theater's interest in a potential development on the North County Transit District land near the intersection of Route 101 and Lomas Santa Fe Drive. Developer Greg Shannon, a theater subscriber and then of Sedona Pacific, was spearheading the project.

But the city of Encinitas was dangling a similar dollar-a-year lease for a spacious facility in a proposed new shopping center near El Camino Real.

(Ironically, it now appears that Encinitas may hammer out a dollar-a-year lease with Miracle Theatre Productions, a successful commercial theater producer formerly with the Theatre in Old Town.) When Ellenstein first weighed the two possibilities in 2003, he projected a \$6 million or \$7 million cost for the building, saying, “This is not just idle chat. This is real. I’m guessing that within a year we’ll announce a capital (fundraising) campaign.”

Nearly four years after committing to Solana Beach's offer, there's still no capital campaign, despite long-drawn plans, a city proclamation proudly praising the homegrown theater, many revisions to its drawings; and after scores of meetings, and a promise by NCRT to pay \$90,000 toward traffic mitigation and other fees.

North Coast Repertory Theatre by the numbers

Budget: \$1.58 million, up from \$900,000 in 2001-02.

Productions: 7, plus a holiday show and educational productions

Subscribers: 2,038

Equity (the actors' union) contracts: 19 so far this year (53 percent of the actors employed), up from 10 actors (28 percent) in all of 2003-04.

Cedros Crossing Theater Project cost: estimated at \$20 million today; estimated at \$10 million-\$12 million when negotiations began in 2004.

Board members: 20, after a bylaw change the raised the total from 13 to accommodate the yet-to-launch capital fundraising for the new theater.

Among the other compromises: NCRT agreed not to build a fly loft, the tall structure to the rear of the stage that houses scenery, curtains, props that drop onto the stage, as well as catwalks for crew and scaffolding for lighting. Heebner said such a stage house would be “out of scale” with the style of the surrounding community.

NCRT development director Karen Begin said last week that the delays have had a snowball effect. “We cannot fund-raise for a project that has not been approved – and the renewal of our current lease is tied to progress on Cedros Crossing.”

After the various negotiations, Shea Homes took over Sedona Pacific. Shannon is still in charge of the project. Shea has signed a lease with the North County Transit District; NCRT has already signed a sublease with Shea Homes.

But the city has to approve what is put in there – and the dates for NCRT's acquisition of the land keep moving forward.

“Everyone who has come to work here in the last four years,” said Begin, “is extremely excited about the opportunity to grow a theater like this. And when you have a developer as willing to accommodate our needs and community objections as Greg has been, it's really rare.”

While commercial and residential tenants will likely come and go, the Amtrak/Coaster station and NCRT “could be there 50 or a 100 years,” Shannon said, just as the Old Globe has been a 75-year-old landmark in Balboa Park.

Still, it appears some Solana Beach residents would rather the land remain an 1,800-foot-long free parking lot – a sea of cars. The attendant at the train station's Chamber of Commerce Information Desk boasted recently that “People from San Diego can drive up here and park for free for up to a month. Instead, they're going to put a four-story paid parking garage underground. They're going to ruin everything here.”

The Chamber of Commerce, like the mayor, has not taken an official position on the environmental report or the project.

“Opponents have no clue what's required to operate a professional theater,” Shannon said. “It's frustrating to me personally as well because North Coast Rep is a proven entity; it's been around for 25 years, yet only a couple of years ago the area around the train station included a trailer court and a crack house. It was declared blighted. The city wanted this redevelopment.”

Shannon also contended that “we are in compliance with every single local and state development resolution. They can turn it down,” he said, “only if they don't want to follow the law.”

NCRT board member Sarno has been serving the theater since its beginnings when he designed and built its lighting grids. For more than a decade he's had board positions, and as VP for planning has been working on the expansion project since the city of Solana Beach inspired the dream four years ago.

“If we had been around the block a few more times politically than we have, we might have reconsidered what we were getting into,” Sarno said, adding that the “death by delay” may be a “stealth operation by no-growthers to kill Cedros Crossing. Smart-growthers everywhere know the power of infill near a train station.”

On one thing, however, Heebner, Shannon and Sarno do agree: The most optimistic scenario puts the date for city, then Coastal Commission approval of the Cedros Crossing development in December of this year, with completion of the parking garage at least a year later, and completion of the theater in 2010 – seven years after NCRT bought into its Solana Beach dream.