

London Free Press Monday, February 21, 2000

Readers support orchestra bailout

By MARY-JANE EGAN, Free Press Reporter

Losing Orchestra London would deal a blow to the city's downtown and leave a cultural void, its general manager will argue in a city hall pitch today for needed cash.

The 24-year-old symphony has until tomorrow to face the music, when its board must decide between bankruptcy or drastic cuts.

"A city is not made up of just one aspect of society," said David Haward, who doubles as the orchestra's second bassoon player.

"Sports, business, arts and culture are all part of a healthy city. If you look at cities that are growing and thriving, they have a healthy balance of all these aspects."

Many Londoners seem to share Haward's view.

Asked if the city should give more funding for cultural institutions, Free Press readers overwhelmingly answered yes.

In calls and e-mails, nearly 200 readers voted 7-1 in support of the orchestra's appeal for more funding. It goes before the city's community and protective services (CAPS) committee today.

Many were passionate in their call for bailout funds for the institution, arguing a city without culture is also one without heart.

But opponents questioned why all taxpayers should help foot the bill for a form of entertainment in which they may have no interest.

Facing a \$600,000 debt by the end of this season, the orchestra has proposed the city commit \$450,000 in annual funding for the 26-member ensemble that runs on a \$2.1-million annual budget.

Coun. Ab Chahbar, who chairs the CAPS committee, agreed to a last-minute addition to the agenda for the orchestra but said it'll be dealt with in a private session.

Closed doors are needed in case the orchestra is considering staff cuts or changes to its Centennial Hall rental agreement, he said.

Chahbar wouldn't say if he favours more city financial aid, but said the fact he added the item to the agenda "shows which way I'm leaning -- I'm certainly willing to hear what they have to say."

CAPS will then make a recommendation that will go before city council later today.

The city now gives Orchestra London \$125,000 a year and receives the same back in rent for the group's use of Centennial Hall.

The arrangement works out to 38 cents per Londoner, compared with Windsor and Kitchener, which provide \$1 a resident, and Thunder Bay's \$1.16 a resident.

The London orchestra receives \$255,000 from provincial and federal arts agencies and earns about \$900,000 in ticket revenue. It also raises about \$600,000 from special events and donations.

Haward acknowledged the orchestra has had a history of financial woes but said London isn't alone. "The whole arts community in Canada, especially now, has been going through a very difficult time," he said. Hamilton's orchestra went bankrupt about four years ago and is "struggling to recreate itself."

Haward described London's as one of "the 10 major orchestras in the country with by far the lowest budget."

He said its positive spinoffs extend beyond the \$500,000 it contributes to the city's economy.

"Our players are involved in so many aspects of the community, we're ambassadors for the city," he said, citing teaching stints in the schools, tours outside London and engagements on CBC Radio.

Orchestra members — with a base salary for a full-time player pegged at \$20,000 a year — are "certainly not in it for the money," he said.

Lindsey Elwood, chairperson of the London Downtown Business Association, said loss of the orchestra "would not only be a blow to downtown, but to all of London."

He said the association views downtown "as the centre of culture and entertainment and when we're trying to revitalize downtown, Orchestra London and Theatre London are an integral part of that."