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Councillors cool to orchestra handout

By **Debora Van Brenk** -- Free Press City Hall Reporter

Teetering Orchestra London won't have much luck stumbling to city hall for more cash out of taxpayer pockets, some London councillors say.

Even if the orchestra board comes up with a sound business plan, an expected \$500,000 request to council is too rich for some, including Coun. Gary Williams.

"That's just far outside of the bounds of credibility," Williams said. He's prepared to talk about funding the group up to 10 per cent of its budget, or about \$200,000 on a budget of \$2 million but "not to the tune of half a million dollars a year."

He wants to see some sign of community backing before doling out an extra cent. If "no matter how much money you throw at them, there's a strong possibility this year they'll be poof, then there's not much sense giving them money this year."

Perilously close to packing it in late last week before settling on a final-hour campaign to stay solvent, the orchestra already gets \$125,000 a year from city hall and was floated an extra loan of \$110,000. But the orchestra needs \$1.2 million to pay its bills and rid itself of liabilities.

Council members had even been warned the orchestra was insolvent before the organization announced it will launch a last-ditch effort.

The money-raiser is to be made public Tuesday.

Orchestra London chairperson David Stelpstra said the city won't be the first to get hit up. "We will attempt first to help ourselves." Pledges for "for relatively sizable dollars" have come already.

The city's per-capita support in taxes falls well below average for Canadian cities, he said, and its rent for use of city facilities is also higher than other cities.

Deputy Mayor Anne Marie DeCicco said numbers don't matter if the organization is weak. The orchestra has "to make some changes that get at the heart of, 'How did they get to where they are?' " She said fundamental changes are needed.

Ward 4 Coun. Bud Polhill said he didn't support the last request for cash and would need a compelling argument to favour any more. He and several others are especially concerned about the orchestra's practice of using next season's subscription cheques to float this season's operations.

Stelpstra said the orchestra board has decided subscription money will be held in a trust fund and not used this season. But that adds to the cash-flow crunch.

Ward 2 Coun. Rob Alder said a big donation from supporters would go a long way to showing him Londoners want the orchestra to rebound. "I guess what I'm saying is that Rob Alder is pretty tight-fisted yet," he said.

Controller Orlando Zamprogna said the lineup keeps growing for taxpayer money for groups to keep afloat. "We aren't really doing justice to the taxpayers. We need to make a list" of which groups are most deserving of civic help, he said.

Stelpstra agreed the community needs to show "significant support" for the orchestra. He said every revenue source will be tapped and every expense will be examined. "There is nothing that is sacrosanct at this point."

The Grand Theatre is also scrambling to raise money after a bank demanded a review last fall to be sure loans could be repaid.