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## **City council conducts heated debate on fate of troubled Orchestra London**

By RANDY RICHMOND, Free Press Reporter

Orchestra London supporters were "cautiously optimistic" as city council debated the future of the struggling symphony late into the night after a bailout request yesterday.

But a rescue could come with a pricetag that would force the orchestra to restructure, surrender more financial control to the city or hook up with the Grand Theatre, hinted David Stelpstra, who chairs the orchestra's board.

"Any creative solution that makes sense, we're receptive to," he said after presenting a rescue plan to a city hall committee.

Orchestra officials had said today would be crunch day on which the board would have to decide between bankruptcy or drastically slashing its operation unless there were a long-term fix for its cash problem.

The 24-year-old symphony needs \$110,000 to pay immediate bills and is seeking \$450,000 in annual funding from the city.

The city now gives the orchestra \$125,000 a year, but collects that back in rent from Centennial Hall, where the ensemble plays.

"I certainly got a sense the city doesn't want to lose the orchestra," Stelpstra said last night at city hall.

The orchestra's pitch for relief went to city council's community and protective services committee in a closed-door meeting that ran overtime.

Full council, in another private meeting, later spent several hours in what appeared to be heated debate about the orchestra's future.

Some council members who periodically emerged from the meeting said a long and contentious debate was occupying the council.

In the lobby nearby, anxious musicians and other orchestra supporters waited for any news about the outcome of the session.

Stelpstra said the orchestra has no problem opening its books to the city and would consider

some relationship with the Grand Theatre.

Last weekend, nearly 200 London Free Press readers swamped the paper's feedback phone line and e-mail link, most of them calling for the orchestra's rescue.

The Grand had a brush with financial disaster of its own late last year. The theatre's bank later gave it a year to repay its \$1-million debt and one of London's most respected business leaders -- Don Smith of Ellis-Don -- is heading a campaign to help.