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Struggling orchestra making final pitch

By BRODIE FENLON AND DEBORA VAN BRENK, Free Press Reporters

Teetering near bankruptcy, Orchestra London will launch a "critical" fund-raising effort Tuesday in a final bid to stay afloat, The Free Press has learned.

Without a major cash infusion from city hall and the public, the 51-year-old symphony could fold, board members warned after a closed meeting last night.

"We're not dead, but we're on life support," said Claude Pensa as he left the two-hour meeting.

London Mayor Dianne Haskett said she understands a "positive announcement" will be made Tuesday.

"I think it's very important for us to have an orchestra in London," she said, while refusing to say whether she'd endorse giving the orchestra more city money.

Deputy Mayor Anne Marie DeCicco called yesterday for "fundamental changes" in how the orchestra is run, noting its financial problems run "pretty deep."

"Those problems have to be solved by more than just throwing money at it," DeCicco said.

The Masterworks concerts scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday are still a go and details of the fund-raiser won't be revealed until Tuesday, said board chairperson David Stelpstra.

He refused to say how much cash is needed to keep the orchestra playing.

But a confidential briefing given to city councillors yesterday says Orchestra London needs \$1.2 million to meet its obligations and rid itself of liabilities this season alone, sources told The Free Press.

After that, the orchestra would still need \$500,000 a year from city hall.

"The worst-case scenario, you go broke," Stelpstra said.

"You shut the doors, musicians lose their jobs, you lose your status with the granting agencies, which means you have to start over.

"It is really not an option on our list," he said.

The orchestra's dire financial picture was outlined to city council's board of control in a closed session Wednesday. That followed a meeting between city and orchestra officials earlier this week, where insolvency was discussed as the only option.

Three weeks ago, city council granted the beleaguered symphony a \$110,000 bailout loan, of which \$53,000 has already been used to pay musicians' salaries, Stelpstra said.

Declining attendance, lost government revenue, inflation and higher business costs have forced the board into a corner, he said.

Asked if the orchestra had considered declaring bankruptcy yesterday, Stelpstra said only: "We can't rule out anything at this point, but that's obviously a last resort for us."

"This is a very, very serious concern," said Paul Sharpe, president of the American Federation of Musicians, Local 279, which represents the orchestra's 27 full-time and 17 part-time musicians.

"But I don't believe it can't be overcome. I remain optimistic," he said. "This orchestra has been resilient."

One council member was confident the orchestra can rebound. "It's not the first time a cultural organization has found itself up to its eyeballs in debt and swam itself to safety,

The orchestra has more than 600 individual donors, 40 corporate sponsors and 75 corporate donors. It receives \$125,000 a year in city funding, but pays about the same back in rent for Centennial Hall.

Stelpstra lashed out at critics who suggest the orchestra's finances have been mismanaged, noting administrative costs have remained the same for 10 years despite inflation.