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Orchestra London scores city's help

By **DEBORA VAN BRENK**, Free Press City Hall Reporter

Financially troubled Orchestra London has found a grace note from city hall -- as long as the band finds immediate help from Londoners at large.

Council agreed last night to hand over the remaining half of the \$110,000 loan to Orchestra London on the condition the group gets \$50,000 from the community by tomorrow.

A recommendation from the city says if that local support doesn't come through the orchestra may declare bankruptcy.

"In my opinion, I think the city's gone quite a ways" to accommodating the orchestra, Controller Orlando Zamprognna said.

In return, Orchestra London has set targets to raise, in stages, a total of \$330,000 by May 31. It vows not to ask for any additional city cash this year.

"This is a mutually agreed-to proposal," Ward 2 Coun. Joe Swan said last night. The orchestra's board played a large role in proposing the stringent conditions outlined for its continued funding from the city, he said.

If a three-year business plan is approved by the city, politicians may increase annual funding to \$325,000 to \$425,000 in each of the following three years, the agreement says. It would have to be endorsed by the council elected after municipal elections this November.

The orchestra recently discovered it was in financial trouble. It needs \$1.2 million this season to meet obligations and rid itself of its debts.

As late as last week, there were talks of bankruptcy as an only option. The board of directors had said the orchestra could survive only if the city increased current annual funding of \$125,000 to about \$500,000 -- a figure politicians were reluctant to endorse.

Today, the orchestra will announce details of a fund-raising plan to get the rest of the community on side.

"We've done our part. They've done their part. Now they're going to the community to do their part," Swan said.

The orchestra's annual budget is \$2 million. Much of its revenue comes from ticket and subscription sales. Much also comes from government grants, which have dropped in recent years, as have attendance levels.

Controller Russ Monteith said the decisions are now with the orchestra. If the orchestra is unable to meet the fund-raising goals, he said, it's not the city that has pulled the plug.

Zamproga said this council and future councils will have to decide whether the city's \$110,000 loan is repayable and whether other obligations such as unpaid rent on Centennial Hall will also be a forgivable debt. Council's decision last night "doesn't speak to that," he said.

The recommendation also calls on all Londoners to support the orchestra board's fund-raising campaign.

"Council is showing a tremendous amount of confidence in the board," Swan said.

But the decision was not unanimous and several council members objected to the bailout during the vote after the confidential debate.