

Friday, March 14, 2008

Raise the curtain

Hanover Theatre opening caps eight years of work

One of the city's most anticipated events in recent years occurs tonight when the Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts opens its doors in Federal Square. Beyond the theater's significance in the region's entertainment scene, it is a dramatic, tangible demonstration of what can be accomplished when individual vision, community involvement and public-private collaboration are brought to bear.

It took eight years of hard work and \$31 million to transform the former Poli Palace Theatre (most recently the Downtown Showcase Cinemas) into a magnificent, 2,300-seat theater that can accommodate Broadway touring shows and other performances of local, national and international renown.

Edward P. Madaus and Paul J. Demoga have been living the dream of a new theater for downtown Worcester for years. They deserve high praise for their work and dedication that culminate in tonight's gala opening.

The turning point came in December 2006 when Hanover Insurance Group announced a \$2 million contribution to the restoration project. The donation energized the fundraising effort and set the bar high for corporate support. Driving the company's involvement was Frederick P. Eppinger, CEO and president of Hanover Insurance Co., who has played a committed personal and professional financial role.

Crucial to the fundraising success were some \$20 million in historic preservation tax credits and gifts from foundations, individuals and corporations.

The project got another major boost from the Colleges of the Worcester Consortium, whose members collectively pledged \$190,000 a year in support in the form of grants, purchase of blocks of tickets, payments for use of the theater for college productions and rental of space for classes, meetings and functions. The money will be used in the operating budget and to help defray debt.

The restoration truly has been a community-wide effort, and one that will pay dividends. The new theater promises to be a significant asset, bringing into Worcester's downtown people from across the region who may not have visited the city in some time.

The performing arts center is an anchor at the northern end of the city's arts district that, in time, should act as a connection to the cultural institutions of the city. In size and facilities, the Hanover Theatre nicely complements existing entertainment venues, including Mechanics Hall, Tuckerman Hall, the DCU Center and the Palladium.

The beautifully restored theater, and the complementary business it is expected to attract to

Federal Square, should go a long way toward the city's ultimate goal of making downtown an 18-hour venue for entertainment, dining and the like.

The theater opens tonight with a black-tie gala featuring singer Bernadette Peters, and theater officials say future productions booked at the theater are sold-out or very near capacity. By all indications, tonight's grand opening is just the first chapter of what will be a long history of success.