

New music venues not needed for Madison

To the delight of music fans, two new concert venues a few blocks from each other have been proposed for Madison. But do we need either?

City planning documents say “no.”

While the City of Madison has long identified a need for various performance facilities, big indoor concert venues are not among them. And that’s just what these venues are: big. The first, part of a larger mixed-use development on the 1000 block of East Washington Avenue would seat 2,000 to 2,500, according to Madison-based concert promoter Stone House Development and Frank Productions. The other, being constructed by promoter and Madison native Toffer Christensen’s Brooklyn-based company T Presents, is a similar mixed-use development on East Washington’s 800 block that would seat 1,500.

By contrast, the city’s largest current performance spaces are Overture Hall (2,251 seats), Orpheum Theatre (1,730 seats), Wisconsin Union Theater (1,165 seats) and Capitol Theater (1,089 seats).

But two specific reports question the benefits of those proposed venues, especially in the middle of residential neighborhoods. Madison’s 2013 Cultural Plan, a 102-page document compiled over four years by the Madison Arts Commission, and a supplementary 98-page Performing Arts Study commissioned by the mayor’s office both recommended the city focus on creating spaces very different from either proposed venue.

Both planning documents stress that cultural spaces should be spread across the city, including among four extant cultural districts identified in the Cultural Plan. Instead, the two proposed facilities fall in the western portion of the Williamson Street/Atwood Avenue district, almost within the adjacent Lower UW-Madison Campus/Downtown district, where most existing venues are located. Facilities are more keenly needed in South Madison and regions without neighborhood centers already.

Dedicated concert venues are also the wrong type of cultural building to create, according to the reports. The Performing Arts Study specifically observes that, citywide, “while there is some demand for new performance space (of 400 seats and smaller), the greatest need is for rehearsal, production, meeting, administration and storage space.” Even were the proposed spaces within the size parameters requested by the report, they fail to qualify under the Performing Arts Study’s further recommendation that new performance facilities serve “multiple functions with diverse technical requirements.”

The Cultural Plan echoes these same sentiments, adding that Madison’s greatest performance venue needs are a permanent festival area and an outdoor concert venue.

On the other hand, the Performing Arts Study also includes a note that could be viewed as a slim mandate for building the large facilities. It suggests that new audiences for events will have to come from outside the city, so from an economic development standpoint, “one might conclude that one of the few (growth) strategies available to Madison is the establishment of a new, regional or national destination.”

Meanwhile, the underutilized Dane County Memorial Coliseum in South Madison has variable arena seating for more than 10,000. It’s the subject of a recently announced \$300,000 update study to make it more popular with promoters and the community.