Proposed downtown performing arts center will be a focal point in Baton Rouge's Arts District.

By Anne Price
Advance arts critic

The city will support the development of an arts district in downtown Baton Rouge.

Downtown Baton Rouge andghieves completed the process of selecting a site for their new performing arts center. The site is located at the corner of North Boulevard and Louisiana Street, and the facility will be called "Center for the Arts of Baton Rouge." The project is expected to create 800 jobs over the next five years, and it is estimated that the center will generate an annual economic impact of $40 million.

"The city is committed to the development of an arts district, and this project is a positive step in that direction," said Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome. "The center will provide a venue for cultural events and performances, which will further strengthen our city's reputation as a vibrant arts community.

"The Center for the Arts of Baton Rouge will be a world-class facility that will attract visitors from around the world," said Mayor-President Broome. "It will be an important asset to our city and a testament to our commitment to the arts.

"We are thrilled to have the opportunity to bring this project to fruition," said Stephen Williams, executive director of the Baton Rouge Arts Foundation. "The center will provide a venue for a wide range of cultural events, including concerts, theater productions, and dance performances.

"The Center for the Arts of Baton Rouge will be a significant addition to our community, and we are excited to see it come to life," said Mayor-President Broome. "It will be a source of pride for our city and a shining example of our commitment to the arts.

"We are grateful for the support of our partners in this project," said Stephen Williams. "This project would not be possible without the commitment of our community and the leadership of Mayor-President Broome.

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of the company. "I think the theater would create a synergy not currently found in Baton Rouge."

Artistic director Garland Goodwin Wilson said an Arts District and theater could be a haven for artists.

"Our company is attempting to do something fresh, contemporary and innovative. This means we will have a perfect framework for our work," she said.

Neena Kelfstrom, executive director of Playmakers, which is located in the Old State Capitol, said she was impressed with the planning process for the new facility.

"I really feel like these planners have done their homework. I think they listened to the arts groups and have come up with something that will be well used.

"We would never leave the Old State Capitol, but could do different kinds of programming, such as workshops and classes in the new theater. There's a lot of things we could do in that space."

Affordability, one of the key points in the consultants' recommendations, will be the key to how much Playmakers could use the theater, she said.

Larger organizations, such as the Baton Rouge Symphony and Baton Rouge Little Theater (BRLT), would not use the facility for its main performances, but might present classes or small performances there.

"We're supportive of the project. It's too small for us but it's going to be wonderful for smaller arts organizations," said J. L. Nave, executive director of the symphony.

He indicated some smaller events, such as concerts for very young children, would be suitable for the new theater.

The report recommends that BRLT, originally targeted as a principal tenant of a larger theater, stay in its present location in Bon Carre, but suggested ways the company could use the downtown theater.

"We are very supportive of the new plan," said board member Gary Schaefer, who is chairman of the BRLT facilities committee.

"I think the theater will use it to do plays not in the regular season, some plays to reach different audiences with live theater."

Initial community reaction to the proposed new arts center was excited and favorable. Davies summed it up:

"This is the last piece of the puzzle to create a major statement for the arts in Baton Rouge."