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CSUN preps for \$125 million arts center

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NORTHRIDGE - After years of planning and fundraising, officials are set to break ground today on a \$125 million performing arts facility at California State University, Northridge, that will be the biggest performance venue in the region.

With a sleek, modern design laced with stainless steel and glass, the 1,700-seat Valley Performing Arts Center is being hailed by backers as long overdue in an area eclipsed by the more prestigious venues in downtown Los Angeles.

And despite looming budget cuts and a tough economic climate, the college plans to move ahead quickly with the project, CSUN President Jolene Koester said.

"Even in a time of cuts, we have a responsibility to the people of this region," Koester said. "This performing arts center will be here for a long time. It is a culmination of how CSUN serves this community."

Supported by a public-private partnership, the 166,000-square-foot center will primarily host large-scale performances, such as Broadway

shows and orchestral concerts, that in the past have rarely come to the Valley. It is scheduled to open by 2010.

It will have state-of-the-art features including customizable acoustics and an exclusive agreement with the Los Angeles County Music Center that could bring performers like the Los Angeles Opera to the Valley.

"The Valley has been underserved for years," said Olga Garay, executive director of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs.

"I think this will be a winning opportunity ... the whole tenor of the vast Valley communities will be changed."

Garay said her agency has been looking into starting a Valley initiative to boost arts grants and services in the area, and the Performing Arts Center could help the effort by spotlighting the region.

"In the Valley it has been a case of what comes first, the chicken or the egg ... This project is a huge step forward," she said.

But not everyone is convinced the project is the best thing for the Valley's arts community. Some fear it could take patrons away from the smaller, burgeoning performing arts scene in North Hollywood.

"It might swallow up the attention these theaters get and it's already hard enough to get that," said Ed Hayes, owner of several small

theaters in the NoHo Arts District.

Still, longtime Valley residents who have watched as plans for large-scale venues have come and gone, said the project has been long needed.

"For the last 35 years we have had the idea to build a center like this, somewhere in the Valley," said David Fleming, an attorney and local activist who is vice president of the project's steering committee.

Fleming said previous projects failed because the community and real estate developers were skeptical that the area could support a large-scale venue - or that arts patrons would head to a Valley venue rather than the downtown performance halls.

Feasibility studies were done to ensure the CSUN facility would be financially viable, although the project's timing is not exactly ideal.

CSUN is bracing for up to \$30 million in cuts to the campus operating budget as a result of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's \$386 million proposed reductions to the overall CSU system.

And the slow economy has reduced private donations to the project, Fleming said.

Still, college officials said any cuts should not affect the project's funding because more than half of the \$125 million price tag is being covered by state bonds. About \$15 million will come from campus funds that have already been

earmarked.

The campus has also received about \$15 million from private donors and is looking to raise at least \$29 million more.

If those private fundraising efforts fall short, the college has received approval for a \$12 million bridge-financing loan from the CSU Chancellor's Office.

"The Empire State Building was built in the height of the Depression," Fleming said. "So I think we can do this."

While many students don't see the performing arts venue as a campus necessity, most said they are pleased to see plans move forward.

"As long as it doesn't affect students financially and they don't have to ask for an increase in student fees, then I am in favor of the project," said Dina Cervantes, president of the California State Student Association.

"Students just can't take another hit."

Robert Bucker, dean of the arts, media and communication college at CSUN, said he sees the venue as a way to elevate the status of the entire university.

"This facility will contribute significantly to (the community) taking us seriously as a learning environment," Bucker said.

"We are building an atmosphere here that hasn't

existed before, and that is important."

Vance Petersen, CSUN's vice president of advancement, said the center should become a community asset.

"We view this facility as the anchor in the northwest section of the basin," Petersen said.

"Some individuals would say the timing isn't right now, but that's not something that will stop this project."