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Staging a comeback

UT reinvents Bass Concert Hall

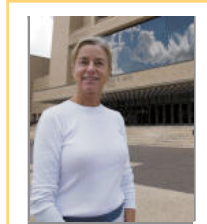
Austin Business Journal - October 13, 2006 by [Chantal Outon](#) ABJ Staff

Austin's largest theater is about to undergo a dramatic change that will cost almost \$15 million and close the venue for nearly two years. But despite having to give up its primary theater to throngs of architects, contractors and construction workers, things are looking up for the Performing Arts Center at the University of Texas.

Opened in 1981 for about \$48 million, Bass Concert Hall is one of six theaters managed by the PAC. The theater, which boasts 200 more seats than Carnegie Hall and is three times the size of the Kennedy Center Opera House, is an astounding eight stories tall, and is already one of the largest stages in the country.

But in the world of performing arts, there's always room for more than one act, and as Bass enters its next 25 years, improvement is on the program.

"Bass will undergo an exciting \$14.7 million renovation that will give it a new look inside and out, and bring the 25-year-old building up to 21st-century fire and safety codes," says Pebbles Wadsworth, director of the PAC.



SARAH KERVER | ABJ
 Pebbles Wadsworth, director of the Performing Arts Center, says her group is working to make Bass Concert Hall a world-class venue.
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Bass will close in the spring of 2007, re-opening in late 2008 with a new glass facade, a rooftop garden, upgraded concession areas, a larger donor lobby, additional ladies' restrooms and a new adjoining bar and restaurant. Inside the hall, new flooring, sidewalls and decor will be added, lighting will be improved and acoustics will be amped up.

UT has committed \$9 million to the massive renovation and the PAC has secured a 30-year bond to cover the remaining \$5.7 million. Though the face-lift comes with a hefty price tag, Wadsworth says the PAC's management skills help make the upgrade more of an appealing investment.

"This is the first time that I know of that any presenting organization has been fiscally sound enough that a bond could be issued for a capital improvement project," she says. "It underscores how we at the PAC manage. We run a business, and the bottom line must never see red."

The PAC maintains a contingency fund that allows the nonprofit organization to ad-lib when necessary. For instance, after Sept. 11, 2001, several PAC shows were cancelled when ticket sales plummeted. That year, the PAC tapped about \$350,000 from its contingency fund, though that money has since been returned to the piggy bank.

"Last year, attendance to PAC performances hit the 253,000 mark. That's up from about 144,000 about five years ago," Wadsworth says. "And memberships, what we used to call subscriptions, have nearly tripled."

Though Wadsworth says it's difficult to define an exact reason for the PAC's growth, she points to broadened programming, a focused marketing plan that works to attract both younger and older members, and educational programs that help raise awareness.

Before Bass closes for renovations, the PAC is expecting a stellar 25th season, programming what Wadsworth calls the very best artists and events.

But while the theater is closed, the PAC won't be resting on its laurels. There will be increased fundraising efforts to double the organization's programmatic endowment from its existing \$10 million to \$20 million. After the Bass renovations, Wadsworth says the PAC will be able to expand its existing program while working to become an incubator for new performing arts work.

Bass is "in good shape for a lady her age," Wadsworth says. "When Bass re-opens, we'll have one of the finest halls in the nation with the largest producing capacity, along with the Met in New York City."

Lessons learned

Listen, and manage, in a transparent environment.

Trust and support your staff.

Work hand in hand with donors, asking for total participation.

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