

# **Raising Our Vision:** ***Restoring and Repurposing Brook Run Theater into the Performing Arts Center of Dunwoody***

**By**  
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## **Introduction**

What would Atlanta do without the Fox Theater? In 1975 efforts were being made by developers to tear down this 1920 gothic designed theater to make way for a high-rise building or another parking lot. Fortunately through the efforts of “Save the Fox” the theater was saved and completely restored. Today it is the third most prestigious and used theater in the country, hosting over 300 events each year. Some in Dunwoody leadership are calling for the same fate at the Brook Run Theater. In years to come, if we act now, we may be asking the same question: “What would Dunwoody do without the Brook Run Theater?”

Noted historic preservationist Elaine Bergman once said: “Historic Preservation requires you to look into the future. You have to project into the future to see what the effects of something now are going to have later.” We have looked into the future and believe nothing could transform our city for the better more than an affordable multi-use Performing Arts Center – and we can have it now!

Dunwoody has done an outstanding job of addressing the transportation needs of the community including resurfacing streets with bike lanes and adding new sidewalks. Significant resources have been applied to public safety and the city has built a world-class police force. Playgrounds have been built and multi-use trails have been constructed. These improvements have contributed to Dunwoody becoming a walkable and bikeable city.

It is now time to address a major need: Providing needed facilities to support the Arts. Our mindset needs to change to thinking of art, not as entertainment, not of education, but of economic development. For certain it is a key ingredient to the fabric of a world-class community that we strive to be. The income level of our citizens together with the educational level dictates that this should happen. In the future, new corporations will look elsewhere if Dunwoody does not offer its workers this important quotient in the equation of quality of life. We have a great visual arts community led by the Spruill Center for the Arts and the Dunwoody Fine Arts Association; we have a Natural Arts Center led by the Dunwoody Nature Center; we have a Preservation Arts presence led by the Dunwoody Preservation Trust; our Dunwoody Woman’s Club is involved in all aspects of these. It is time now to address the last of the arts: **The Performing Arts**. With your support we

can transform the Brook Run Theater into the Performing Arts Center of Dunwoody.

### Background

The Brook Run Theater was constructed in February 1966 to serve the Georgia Retardation Center. The architectural firm of Jones & Associates designed the theater. Originally constructed for mentally disabled residents of Brook Run, the theater accommodated only 250 seats, giving ample room for wheel chairs and even beds. The theater has a fly loft stage, an orchestra pit, dressing rooms, a chapel, a similar size room used for wheel chair basketball (both capable of a seating capacity of 125), six smaller classrooms capable of seating 30-40 people and ideal for breakout sessions in a conference and a loading dock with overhead doors. The building is 34,000 square feet of theater and meeting spaces (see my dropbox link: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/t907458918cpqk7/AAASl6sJcte3yTHXpKceGjiLa?dl=0>) for the complete architectural renderings and a 2011 study by Clark Paterson). This makes Brook Run Theater an ideal setting for a multi-use facility, providing much needed space for meetings, civic events and most important, the performing arts.

### Proposal

The first step in the process is the feasibility study. After several meetings at the theater with the Tomlinson-Graham Group, I recently received a proposal to conduct such a study. The study would include interviewing potential users of the facility. Included among those to be interviewed are the Stage Door Players, Dan and Company, Dunwoody CVB, Dunwoody Nature Center, Spruill Center of Dunwoody, Atlanta Choral Guild, Atlanta Young Singers, Atlanta Center for Puppetry Arts, Spruill Center for the Arts, Stone Mountain Men's Choir, civic organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce of Dunwoody, Dunwoody Preservation Trust (who could incorporate the arts into the annual Lemonade Days Festival again), the Dunwoody Woman's Club, and the Dunwoody Rotary Club (that currently holds meetings in Sandy Spring at the Westin (20,000 square feet of meeting space) for lack of a meeting space in Dunwoody, and the City of Dunwoody. Tomlinson-Graham is a nationally recognized firm with successful restoration work spanning from Washington State to Florida, from Meridian, Mississippi to Charleston, S.C. In Charleston and Serenbe they have contributed to creating that "*sense of place*," eloquently spoken about in the State of the City address. Their website is [www.tomlinson-graham.com](http://www.tomlinson-graham.com). The cost of the study will be \$40,000. To get this program started, ***Queenie and I propose making a donation to the Brook Run Conservancy of \$20,000, predicated on the City matching that amount.*** The outcome of this study will be verification of uses, users, revenues and data that can be fed into the business plan and the fund raising campaign.

### Fundraising

I have interviewed a fundraising firm for the project, Convergent Non-Profit Solutions, an Atlanta based fundraising group. As Vice Chairman of the Jekyll Island Foundation, I had the opportunity of interviewing six other firms and found Convergent had the relevant skills and track record to recommend them to the

entire board for a fundraising effort currently underway for the restoration of the historic Jekyll Island Museum (to be rebranded as the Jekyll Island Mosaic). The firm has performed their role extremely well, with completion scheduled for late 2015. The lead donor is expected to be the Woodruff Foundation with a donation of \$1 million. Convergent's website is [www.convergentnonprofit.com](http://www.convergentnonprofit.com). Dave Popen, a principal of Convergent, has visited the Brook Run Theater and believes that upon successful completion of the feasibility study, the funds can be raised for the facility through **Public Private Partnerships**.

***Funds are not the most important thing you raise in fundraising; the most important thing we raise is our VISION!*** With major corporations such as State Farm and Mercedes moving into Dunwoody, naming rights may be an attractive route to pursue together with foundations that are committed to the arts.

### **Architect**

I have had meetings with Sean Hamlin, a Dunwoody resident, architect and the person that designed the new Dunwoody High School auditorium and the total school renovation. Sean is a senior architect with Perkins+Wills (see their website at [www.perkinswill.com](http://www.perkinswill.com)) an internationally recognized firm celebrating 80 years of excellence in design. Sean and I have spoken about the concept of adding a new lobby consisting of vaulted glass walls that will be extended out to the existing sidewalk and additional new rest rooms and a ticket booth. A full service kitchen could be part of the improvements made to bring the facility up to Dunwoody standards and to address the need for food service during and before events in the park. The new facade will create a modern 21st century look to the theater (much as the one recently created by a similar edition to the Atlanta History Center (who also received a large grant from the Woodruff Foundation). You can also see the architectural vision created by the restoration of the Dunwoody High School from a 1960 facade to a more modern building that blends in well with the expectation and style of our community. The theater is capable of seating 500 patrons, has fly loft stage (which means multiple events could be staged during the same days). The facility has two large rooms capable of meeting space seating of 125 people and six break out rooms capable of seating 30-40 people. This makes it ideal for corporate meetings, overflow convention space, allowing Dunwoody to attract more conventions. Today only the Crown Plaza Ravinia (30,000 square feet of meeting space) offers that type of meeting facility. Once that space is booked, Dunwoody loses consideration for conferences and conventions of size. Katie Bishop spoke at a recent City Council meeting about meeting space being one of her top priorities for growth in the DCVB.

Now a little about the potential users.

**Stage Door Players:** SDP is celebrating its 41st season of consistent excellence in performing in Dunwoody. The current theater seats 125 people and has consistently had sold out performances. With six shows each with 16 performances, the maximum revenue received by SDP each year is \$420,000. The Brook Run

Theater is capable of being reconfigured to accommodate 500 seats, giving the potential revenue of \$1,680,000. This will allow the theater to present more current theatrical work, allowing for increase in ticket price and bringing in additional season ticket holders from outside of Dunwoody. Today a significant number of theatergoers are from outside of Dunwoody. This represents an opportunity to expand the revenue beyond the theater to our restaurants and hotels.

**Dan & Company:** Dan & Company is one of the oldest businesses in Dunwoody that has been continuously operated for nearly a half century (see [www.DanandCompany.com](http://www.DanandCompany.com)). Until this year, Dan & Company has used the Civic Center for its performances and recitals. As you may be aware, the Civic Center is being torn down and Dan & Company has no place to (operate) perform. This year Dan & Company had to schedule performances and recitals at the Rialto Theater.

One major graduate of Dan & Company is currently starring in Mama Mia on Broadway, Elena Ricardo (see <http://www.playbill.com/multimedia/video/mamma-mia-stars-elena-ricardo-and-jon-jorgenson-sing-baby-its-cold-outside-338005>) who made her Dunwoody debut on the stage of Brook Run Theater during one of the Lemonade Days shows in 2006, when she performed with her father, Michael. Elena's mother, Kathy, is an instructor at Dan & Company. Both her parents have also had major roles on Broadway.

**Dunwoody CVB:** DCVB executive director, Katie Bishop recently indicated that the most needed thing she faces is the lack of meeting space. The only facility that can accommodate large conferences is the Crowne Plaza. Once that space has been booked there is no where for a potential conference to be held in Dunwoody, so promoters must look elsewhere. The Brook Run Theater not only represents seating capacity for 500 in the auditorium, but smaller venues of 125 in two portions of the building and 6 break out rooms for up to 40 people.

**Center for Puppetry Arts:** Puppetry Arts performed at Brook Run Theater during Lemonade Days for several years bringing this wonderful media to the northern arc and entertaining young and old alike. It is expected that a similar opportunity would be welcomed by Puppetry Arts.

**City of Dunwoody:** Having a facility where city functions could be held such as the State of the City address, planning session, forums and other civic events.

**Atlanta Young Singers:** AYS has been part of our family for nearly four decades. Six of our children were in AYS and toured internationally with this incredible singing group of children from age 6 to 18. Today my granddaughter continues the Ross legacy in the group. Queenie and I were members of the board for over 20 years. Today the group, as they did in 1976, when it was conceived by Mr. Steven Ortlip as Young Singers of Callanwolde (since rebranded as Atlanta Young Singers),

practices at the historic Callanwolde mansion. This is (anything but) a place where up to 200 children go twice each week to practice, only on performance night they must locate a church to perform in. With the proper opportunity in a theater with rehearsal space potential (such as the two large rooms described above, I believe they would consider relocating to Dunwoody. My daughter Noelle started an AYS performance group in Dunwoody to accommodate the large number of potential singers from this area. AYS crosses economic, social and racial lines from throughout metro Atlanta. I can only imagine how this theater would light up with these young voices (see <http://www.aysc.org/recordings.html>) on a regular basis.

**Dunwoody Today;** The Spruill Center for the Arts is a world class visual arts organization that attracts more out of town residents to our city than any other group. The Nature Center provides a strong Natural Arts and education facility to our city. The Brook Run Theater could complete the need our community has for a strong performing arts facility. Our city will never reach the greatness of its potential without a complete resume of arts of all forms and disciplines. Our neighboring city, Sandy Springs has just approved \$45 million to construct a new theater that will not offer anything other than 250 additional seating capacity. There will not be the additional number of meeting rooms and breakout facilities. Our theater as envisioned herein, will not compete with Sandy Springs in terms of our plans: Local artistic performances. It is imperative that our city seize the opportunity for a price expected to be 10% of what Sandy Springs is spending (\$5 million) we can have a world class facility that we can be proud of. It will mark the moment that Dunwoody grows into a "***sense of place.***" With your help, the Brook Run Conservancy stands ready to make this happen. We are doing our part to take that first step of pledging \$20,000 to have a nationally recognized group do a feasibility study to begin the restoration process. Time is of the essence. Today it is our dream; tomorrow it can be a reality.

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