

Reasons to Vote YES on Nov. 7 Winslow School Bond #5:

THE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Within some circles it appears that the November 7 school reorganization and renovation referendum is becoming a Performing Arts Center referendum. The presence of a \$2.9 million performing arts center in the budget is seemingly becoming the only argument against the bond. This third of the project cost is being treated as superfluous fluff. A want, not a need. In today's post I will argue that the Performing Arts Center (PAC) is actually a powerful reason to vote FOR the measure. And in the course of this I am forced to defend the performing arts and their place in the curricular and extracurricular aspects of elementary through high school education. Piece of cake, right?

This is an opinion piece based on personal experience and observation. It is based on my experience as a fine arts major in college and also as a law student and lawyer, on my past experience on the boards of Common Street Arts and Waterville Creates, on my experience as the husband of an English and drama teacher, and as parent of a theatre major and soon-to-be dance major. Take any part of my assertions here, whether a sentence or a paragraph, and paste it into Google and I am confident you'll find legions of articles and studies providing statistics about my points. But alas, I am unable to devote more time to this essay than I have here.

WHAT IT REALLY IS:

First, let's deconstruct what is meant by a Performing Arts Center. The term suggests something more grandiose than what is planned. What will be constructed is a large box with a sloped audience area containing 600 seats. There will be a stage with a manual fly system for lifting scenery, a light and sound booth, and an under-stage orchestra pit/storage area. A manual rather than motorized fly system has been chosen to save cost and to provide a teaching opportunity as students learn "the old way" still prevalent in many theatres before progressing to automated systems. The entire thing will be ADA compliant both as to audience and stage. It will have air conditioning. It will have modern lighting and sound systems. It will be "nice." Clean and new. Your audience experience will be much better. The educational opportunity for the students will be much better.

At the recent information session, someone submitted a question asking how many additional staff it would take to run it. The answer is none, but it made me worry that

when this grandiose term “Performing Arts Center” is used, it makes it sound like the Cross Insurance Center in Bangor or something. This is not a stand-alone place with a technical staff, marketing office, and all that. It’s a teaching facility. The students will build the sets, run the lights, run the sound, operate the fly systems, sell the tickets - that is part of the educational value.

But the building is just a part of the school designed for the performing arts and as a place of assembly for the student body, their parents, extended family, and community. If you wanted to use the least glamorous term, you could call it an auditorium. I’d prefer to call it a theatre, marked particularly by the presence of a fly system. It has been dubbed the “Performing Arts Center.” This is great for the opponents, because it sounds so grand. But there are no marble floors or columns planned. It will not approach the theatres of Broadway or Paris or Rome in grandeur. It is not intended to host traveling professional acts or Broadway touring companies like the Collins Center for the Arts at UMaine Orono. That’s where my mind goes with the phrase Performing Arts Center.

This is just a typical high school theatre - or in this case, a combined junior high/high school theatre. Smaller than Lawrence High School. Smaller than Messalonskee High School. Really, about a mid-size high school theatre. Guess what? In 2017, I am sad to report that the cost of a mid-size high school theatre is \$2.9 million. Going larger was avoided to eliminate the LARGE expense of a code-required elevator and the ensuing decades of extremely expensive elevator maintenance. I remember that committee meeting clearly. When I heard the word elevator, I about jumped out of my skin. I manage a building with two elevators. They are money pits. If you can avoid an elevator, count yourself lucky.

The new space is also integral to the renovation of THE REST of the existing high school. This is because the space occupied by the current auditorium will be repurposed as classrooms, practice rooms, and instructor offices for the increased load of band, chorus, art, and drama classes for the incoming 7th and 8th grade students as well as the existing 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students. Further evidence of the thriftiness of the PAC design will be repurposing the existing band room into the scene shop and green room (backstage waiting area) serving the theatre stage.

So even if the PAC was slashed from the plan, your net savings would not be a pure \$2.9 million. You still have to provide space for the increased curriculum load I speak of above, unless you are proposing eliminating band, chorus, and drama from the curriculum. You’d still have to add something additional to provide those courses.

INSUFFICIENCY OF THE CURRENT HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM:

The present high school auditorium is really more auditorium than theatre. And so I call it that. It has only 200 seats. It has no system for moving scenery. It has so little stage depth that there is little to no room to pass between a typical set and the back wall. It has no wings for offstage movement and preparation during a show. It has no storage areas for flats, lumber, tools, costumes, and props. It has only rudimentary lighting and an outdated, non-programmable lightboard. It has no scene shop for building sets. It is truly the runt of the area theatres. During the one-act play festival, Winslow students are at a disadvantage due to unfamiliarity with the modern systems of many of the host schools over the past several years, as well as with the generally larger stage spaces.

The students are doing theatre in this space, but it was not well designed for theatre. It is a good place for a lecture on a not-too-popular topic. But it's not a good place for elementary school student concerts (which have been cited as drawing over 500 attendees), for the high school musical, which has turned away disappointed family and community members because of sold out status, or for any meeting of the entire high school student body (presently 460 students - more than double capacity). And this is the status considering the present needs of only the high school. But let me repeat that. Even with the oft-cited dwindling enrollments (which I'll address in other essays) **THE CURRENT HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM CANNOT HOLD THE STUDENT BODY.** 200 seats. 460 students.

The new performing arts center will serve all three schools, and one might simply extrapolate that if a 200 seat auditorium is inadequate for one school, then you need at least 600 seats to serve three schools. This is disingenuous math, but you see my point. If you're spending money on a consolidated facility, of course it will cost more than you might expect to spend on any single school. But it will cost less than three separate school auditoriums of modest nature. This theatre will have both the high school AND junior high attached to it and will also serve the elementary school for performances. And, undoubtedly, any time there is a community event such as a political caucus, council meeting on a special topic (ahem), or awards ceremony, this facility will be called into service.

The new performing arts center will have a fly system (for raising sets and scenery by pulleys), modern lighting and sound equipment, and a scene shop. All of these facilities teach students marketable skills that are in high demand in the U.S. entertainment industry. See more on this below.

IMPORTANCE OF A PURPOSE-BUILT PRESENTATION SPACE:

You may tell me large events can be held in the gym. Why do we even need an auditorium or theatre at all? I share my personal views below. But first - look around. It appears to be the consensus of humanity generally. Every school I can think of has something. Every civilization's ruins have remains of amphitheatres and enclosed theatres. Small groups of people tend to get together and present things. Large groups of people tend to show up to watch. They even PAY to watch. Sometimes it's a political message. But a whole lot of the time it is singing, or acting, or dancing. Maybe it's silly, but humans have always done this. Even in times of poverty and war.

The Junior High was built in 1928 as the Winslow High School, and despite the fact that it was only a high school and the original building size was much smaller than presently, it has a theatre. A 400+ seat theatre, twice the size of the current high school. Apparently the citizens of 1928 felt that a group assembly space of that size was an integral part of the school design. Why else would they devote that much of the school to this purpose? And it must have correspondingly taken that much of the construction budget. Let's repeat - four hundred seats!

Though I will explicitly argue below that such public assembly and presentation really does have value in society, inductive reasoning demonstrates it must. If it didn't, why do humans build so many theatres, stadiums, and auditoriums across all times and all cultures?

WHY SHOULD WE EVEN HAVE A PLACE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS IN OUR SCHOOLS?

I've heard it a hundred times. Paraphrased: "Thank you so much. This was great. We can't believe the change in [daughter/son]". "He/she used to be such a quiet kid. Kind of nervous. I can't believe the change." "She's so outgoing and confident now." "He's really made a great group of friends and loves working with tools."

As the spouse of a drama teacher, I am often within earshot when these comments are made to her with earnest faces (and sometimes even tears of joy) after a show. The remarks were the same in Arizona 23 years ago as they are here today. But because multi-generational families are so prevalent here, the remarks come from grandparents, aunts, and uncles, as well as parents.

And guess what? They don't only come from the parents of children who got lead roles. They come from the parents of students in the ensemble, the set-building team, the tech crew, and the costumes and makeup team. The benefits of the skills, experiences, camaraderie and teamwork extend into many areas of life, and not just the obvious. Let's explore a little bit below.

ONSTAGE:

Participation in the performing arts can be transformative. I dare say nothing builds confidence and poise like performing in front of a group of people. Once you have taken the risk, exposed yourself to applause or dreaded silence, made mistakes and covered them in the blink of an eye, suffered surprises and calamities yet persevered, there is no public speech or presentation in the corporate boardroom, the political chamber, the press conference or the courtroom that you cannot give. I have seen many the expert in their field and many the proponent of a worthy cause crippled by hesitation, shaking hands, speech crutches, and other symptoms of nervousness.

In college I had a one semester course called "Public Speaking" and one semester of "Introduction to Acting." In public speaking we learned how to extensively plan speeches, create outlines, and employ attention-getting devices. We learned concepts like recency and repetition. And we rehearsed over and over to create the appearance of being natural and confident. But it was just that - appearance. The result for me was a shaky, dry-mouthed, exhausting 10 minutes at the podium.

In acting, we performed comedy routines, lip-synced to a full song before the class of 20, participated in ridiculous exercises like improvising a human machine in which each was a part or gear, and performed a dramatic monologue from our favorite movie or TV show (I chose Agent Cooper speaking to his tape recorder after being shot, from Twin Peaks.) We generally took risks and made fools of ourselves in front of each other. As a result, we became natural and confident. It was not just an appearance. We had taken all the risks. Anything normal life presentation was comparatively predictable and easy.

Guess which of these experiences gave me confidence to appear in court, speak clearly to a judge, calmly question witnesses, and sometimes just stand in silence in the middle of court thinking while everyone waited on me. Guess which experience better prepared me for the unscripted surprises - the startling answers from witnesses, the missing document, the dropped book, the opponent's objection. Guess which experience now serves me better when entering a room with two buyers, two sellers,

two realtors, a loan officer, and possibly a few cranky children to conduct a real estate closing. Yes. The mere semester of acting. By far.

These examples are about acting, but I feel quite sure the experience and benefit is similar for band and chorus. My musical ambitions were thwarted by my unwillingness to learn to read music and practice, so I cannot speak from experience.

Though numerous Winslow drama and music students have gone on to major or minor in these subjects in college, most will not. But they really will be transformed into confident, natural speakers, leaders, collaborators, and clear communicators. They will be better able to excel as businesspeople, as scientists, as realtors, as lawyers, as politicians, and as military members.

BACKSTAGE:

At the end of the show, after the applause for the actors and actresses, you will see them gesture to the back of the theatre, where you are expected to express your appreciation for the light and sound technicians. Then to the orchestra pit (or off to the left backstage in the current state of Winslow affairs) for applause for the musicians. And then a large group of kids clad in black will come out on stage for a bow and applause. These are stage managers, prop crew, makeup artists, costume crew, and stagehands. And not even appearing onstage are generally the director, playwright, composer, set designer, etc. Also not appearing are the parents (who along with these students) spent many weekends working with power tools, paintbrushes, hammers, saws, needles and thread, building the sets and making the costumes. It has come to be the case at Winslow High School that some of these students sign up to do only this. They don't even want to be on stage. They enjoy the technical and mechanical facets of stagecraft.

These days, many of these students are having their first experiences with tools. Surprising, right? True. With a lack of metal shop, wood shop, and home economics in modern schools, the drama program has become the surrogate training ground for hands-on skills. It is an environment where students actually design something and then construct it. Then they employ it in the show. And at the end, they tear it down, salvage all they can for re-use in future shows, and clean everything up.

These kids deserve more applause than they are afforded. And for them, the potential of a career related to the performing arts is far greater than the actors. Have you ever stayed to watch all the credits at the end of a movie or let the Netflix streaming run itself

out at the end? Have you noticed the legions of names scrolling past after the cast list? Sometimes many columns wide, and of a small font, it scrolls and scrolls and scrolls. Those are jobs. Those are careers. They have gainful employment as illustrators, lighting designers, computer programmers, gaffers, key grips, location scouts, agents, choreographers, musicians, lawyers, electricians, carpenters, metalworkers, drivers, stuntmen, costume designers, etc. You get my point. The next episode of Game of Thrones doesn't just spring from the imagination of someone right onto your screen. The next Avengers movie doesn't just materialize. Literally tens of thousands of people make these things happen. And they are paid for it.

Another example. On one of the trips to New York City that my wife takes high school students on (for which every nickel is provided through non-tax fundraising - don't worry), we got a backstage tour. I noted the complexity of the stage, set, lighting and sound rigging, microphones, lightboard, soundboard, and more. Truly bewildering and awe-inspiring. But here is the point where a light went on over my own head. Most of these jobs on Broadway and in the motion pictures are union jobs. They are good money. AND....drumroll....these workers have health insurance through their unions. The same applies for musicians in many U.S. symphony orchestras.

THE PERFORMING ARTS AS A VOCATIONAL TRAINING GROUND:

So I propose you all change or expand your mindset about the arts. They are not a mere amusement. They are a source of skills that will boost your success in any discipline AND they are a place to learn skills that can lead to well-paying jobs (with health insurance) in a burgeoning industry. In a country where most manufacturing jobs have gone overseas or are increasingly automated, the entertainment industry is bigger than ever. Consider the economic impact of the arts on the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (2014 seems to be the most recent data), here:

“Arts and cultural economic activity accounted for 4.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), or \$729.6 billion, in 2014....Core arts and cultural production industries, including performing arts, design services, fine arts education and education services, grew 3.2 percent.”

<https://bea.gov/newsreleases/general/acpsa/acpsanewsrelease.htm>

“This represents 4.2 percent of the GDP—a larger share of the economy than transportation, tourism, or construction.”

<https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/naappd/arts-facts-arts-and-cultural-production-contribution-to-gdp-2017>

So that...THAT...is why I contend that the construction of the performing arts center is as important as the construction of classrooms for math, science, English, economics, history, foreign languages, and gyms and fields for physical education and sports. The instruction, practice, and performance of these skills, whether onstage or backstage, needs to occur in a facility that adequately emulates the actual future work environments our students may confront and work in.

CONCLUSION:

So I didn't really want to have to get into the defense of the arts as part of human civilization and the changing U.S. economy just to defend it in our schools; in order to defend the construction of a 600-seat box to house it; in order to defend a school bond for which the initial impetus was that the junior high is dying and in which the undiscussed MAJORITY - two-thirds - is for classrooms, gyms, cafeterias, and demolition. But here you have it. Yes, the expenditure is justified. Yes, a bond (loan) is the proper and necessary way to pay for it (but I'll say more about this in future posts). And yes, the interest incurred and the (possible) .001 tax rate increase to pay it are reasonable and responsible.

Recently, many of our great musicians and actors have been passing away. David Bowie, Tom Petty, Prince, Robin Williams, Carrie Fisher, Debbie Reynolds, Harry Dean Stanton, Jay Thomas, Jerry Lewis, Glen Campbell, Roger Moore, Apart from these and athletes, is there any class of people who engender so much sorrow and reminiscence when they pass? All these people got started making music or acting somewhere. Most, I'll wager, got their start at a high school (or earlier) stage or band room somewhere.

Why are artists like these so revered, praised, and missed, when the arts at the local level and in the schools have to fight so hard for funding and public support? Why does everybody love the arts, but nobody wants to pay for it? How can the arts be treated as a mere adornment on civilization, as a want not a need, when the deaths of artists like these cause sadness for so many Americans?

If you already enjoy and support the arts, then let the opposition to this PAC and the bond as a whole spur you to action. See the opposition in the comments? See the opposition specifically against the PAC? See the unwillingness to pay taxes in a monthly amount less than a cable, Netflix or Hulu subscription? Less annually than a

single concert ticket? You must vote and bring your like-minded friends and family. You MUST take time before, during, or after work to stop and vote. This is not one of those votes that others will carry for you. It will be a close call.

If you don't appreciate the performing arts, and can't see a purpose for having a facility designed to teach and present them as part of a school facility, then I ask you to think of your children, grandchildren and extended family who do. If not them, then of your fellow citizens and possible future citizens who do (see my post about attracting new residents). And if not them, then of yourself, who will benefit from the heightened property values and community investment that excellent school systems attract, as well as the future performing artists (and backstage support crews) of all the future concerts, movies, TV shows, and live events you will ever see. And then please vote yes, not in spite of the Performing Arts Center, but BECAUSE of it.

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Opinion by Tom McCowan

Who is this guy?

- Winslow homeowner since 2001; selected Winslow because of excellent schools
- Real estate lawyer in Waterville
- Father of one WHS graduate and one senior; husband of WHS teacher