

RECREATION

U.D. offers \$2.5M commitment to Summer Stage

By Pete Bannan

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UPPER DARBY » On Tuesday, Mayor Barbarann Keffer announced a commitment of \$2.5 million over ten years to support Upper Darby Summer Stage.

The funds would secure up-to-500 full scholarships annually for Upper Darby residents to participate in the nationally renowned theater arts program. The commitment would also guarantee the program stays in its home at Upper Darby High School Performing Arts Center.

The proposal includes a partnership with the Upper Darby School District worth an estimated \$125,000 per year to secure the high school's Performing Arts Center and to offset ongoing maintenance and necessary long-term capital investments in the facility, officials said.

"The Summer Stage program is an invaluable public trust and that is why we have worked so hard to put together a plan that preserves, protects, and grows the program even in the wake of Mr. Dietzler's retirement," said Keffer. "The township extends its sincere thanks to (Harry Dietzler) for his many decades of service. I am truly grateful for his vast contributions to our community and that is why our plan offers him full artistic control for as long as he wishes to participate. Now more than ever, it is critically important that all kids, regardless of their families' financial situation, get to experience the magic of Upper Darby Summer Stage."

Under the plan, the Upper Darby Arts and Education Foundation would administer the pro-

gram with full artistic, personnel, and financial control based on their own program fees, ticket prices, fundraising, and internal management capacity. In order to safeguard taxpayer's historic and future investments and interest in the program, the proposal would give the township and school district significant representation on the Foundation Board of Directors and create transparency to the public with the foundation's bylaws, board, and finances. While there are still details to be worked out and the proposal would need final sign-off from all three parties.

Dietzler, who is now Executive Director at UDAEF was excited about the proposal. "On the face of this it looks amazing," Dietzler said. "It's giving control of Summer Stage to the foundation which is the main thing we were asking for."

He said there is some concern about the wording of control of the board. He noted they are a public nonprofit but the offer of two seats on the board, one for the township and one for the school district is agreeable.

"Maintaining the independence of the foundation while providing representation on the board for the district and township has been a key issue," Dietzler said.

"What is critically important to us is the foundation maintains its independence so it is able to raise the philanthropic dollars and corporate dollars it has the capacity to raise that government and government controlled entities are not able to," said Terry Tracy President of the UDAEF board.

Tracy has not officially been



MEDIANEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

Upper Darby Summer Stage performed "Aladdin" in 2015.

contacted by township officials about the offer.

There are 12 seats on the foundation board overall.

"I'm thrilled that it looks like we are negotiating in good faith and are in a place where the framework of a deal is able to get done," Tracy said. "The expansion of the scholarship program that Mayor Keffer is proposing is welcome."

According to Tracy the \$125,000 per year of participation fees only accounts for part of the overall cost of the program; he said that it is imperative that the foundation is positioned for success in raising philanthropic dollars, he called it a win-win.

"The township and district are reaching out in support of Summer Stage and we welcome that. We are thrilled they heard

the concerns of the community and they are willing to work in partnership with us," said Dietzler. "It's a giant step forward in the future of Summer Stage and we really look forward to sitting down at the table and working out these details, I'm optimistic that's where we're going to go."

"The school district since the meeting last week and I think in general has demonstrated a real willingness to make access to the performing arts center work, a lot of this is about economics and I think it is really important that all parties get back around the table," Sweeney said. "Putting this proposal against the real economics of the program is where the rubber meets the road to make sure this program is situated for solvency over the long haul."

Tracy said he was fine with

the economics putting more responsibility on the foundation to raise more dollars but the structure must be done the right way.

"I'm thrilled that we would maintain artistic control and administer the program, that what we asked for and I'm glad they are taking us seriously," Dietzler said. "If we can manage that we have the people and the professional staff."

"It's truly been an honor to work with Harry Dietzler these past two years, particularly in overcoming the challenges presented by the pandemic to ensure a strong 46th season," said Vincent Rongione, Upper Darby's Chief Administrative Officer. "If we can get through that together, I am confident we can get through this too. Obviously, it was disappointing when they chose to take the negotiations public but Mayor Keffer's commitment to delivering for the students and the community has never wavered. She told us to stay positive and find a way to make sure the program stays in Upper Darby and goes on for decades to come."

Rongione continued, "The ball is really in the foundation's court because this proposal addresses every one of their stated concerns and is a homerun for the community. I sincerely hope that cooler heads prevail and we can all begin planning for a fabulous season 47 of Upper Darby Summer Stage."

Keffer continued, "The school board and the district administration have always been great partners and friends to Upper Darby Summer Stage. I am grateful for their commitment to the

STAGE » PAGE 7

Stage

FROM PAGE 3

program and their focus on staying positive and doing what is in the best interest of the community.”

Upper Darby’s first mayor, Sonny Kane green-lit the program in 1975 and after its first successful season said, “There are alternatives for those not attracted or ori-

ented to sports. Our new summer program called Summer Stage has been very successful.” Since that time, the program has pursued excellence and inclusiveness.

It has served as a forum for area youth to learn and showcase their talents including a number who went on to national attention such as Tina Fey and Monica Horan Rosenthal. “We’ve got a season to get up and running, like yesterday, and time is of the essence to get this done,” Tracy added.