

As fees rise, town halls struggle to break even

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

With luck — and some new ideas — Pontiac-Oakland Town Hall will celebrate its 25th season next year.

Rochester Town Hall probably won't mark its fifth anniversary.

Once very profitable fund-raisers, town halls in Wayne and Oakland counties' suburbs today are struggling to meet expenses. There's little — if anything — left over for causes they support.

Some expect to bail out of the lecture business altogether, while others are picking their brains to come up with new ways to turn things around.

"If we can't make money, there's no point in doing it," said Lois Haack, executive director of the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce, which probably will end its lecture series after this season.

"So we're looking into other ways of fund-raising."

THIS YEAR, such big names as actress Cyd Charisse, astronaut James Lovell and author John Guet are slated to grace town hall stages in places like Bloomfield Hills, Livonia, Northville, Plymouth, Rochester and Troy.

They will talk about their careers, recall favorite stories and answer off-beat ques-

tions that never get asked on the Johnny Carson Show.

"Seeing a person on a one-to-one basis, you get such a different impression of them," explained Debbie Dittmar, president of Livonia Town Hall which she helped start 21 seasons ago.

"Sometimes it's disappointing, but usually you like them better than ever. People just like to be near them."

AT ONE TIME big social events, town halls drew large audiences eager to hear celebrities talk about their lives. Gossiped for the day out, women looked forward to the chance to ask famous people personal questions.

But things began to change in the 1970s as women's lifestyles changed and costs of putting on the shows skyrocketed.

Once the largest lecture series in the nation with more than 2,700 attending, Birmingham Town Hall folded in 1981 when it sold only 700 tickets.

Farmington and Dearborn also ended their lecture series, which had attracted listeners from all over the area.

BLAMED FOR the failures were the number of women returning to work or school, the increasing activities competing for their time, television watching and even a lack of national heroes.

Also, the sponsoring organizations just couldn't keep up with the rising fees of speakers. Cyd Charisse's appearance costs \$4,000, plus air fare from California and expenses here. Lecture organizers say speakers run \$500 to \$15,000.

And meeting rising expenses has become even more difficult with the 1980s recession.

"Since the recession hit, we've been struggling to sell tickets," said Shirley Rutkowski, president elect of Pontiac-Oakland Town Hall. The volunteer organization, which one season donated \$10,000 for charity, just broke even the past three years.

THIS SEASON is starting slowly for Northville, Pontiac-Oakland and Rochester, which all report ticket sales down.

Things are a little better in Plymouth and Troy, where town halls are hoping for a little growth.

One advantage Troy has is that it's financially backed by the school district Adult and Community Education Department.

"We couldn't do it as a fund-raiser," said Mary Emice Fox, who is on the advisory committee which offered single tickets last year to increase attendance. There is a major fund-raiser each year to benefit Troy Town Hall.

Northville Town Hall raised \$5,500 for causes two years ago, but only \$3,000 was left over last year. In their 23rd season, organizers lament that the profit margin is going down.

"Speakers' costs are getting so high it's almost impossible to meet expenses," said

Stacie Korte, publicity director for the lecture series which attracts about 500. "As well as culture, it's just so stimulating. I think we would be the losers in our communities if we didn't have town halls."

STARTED FOUR years ago to benefit the local chamber of commerce, Rochester Town Hall makes less each season. Only 300 attended Dennis Whaley's talk last week. The series planners hope only to break even this year.

Tickets were only sold by subscription in the past. But single tickets will be available for actors

Celeste Holm's performance. Nevertheless, the future still looks dim.

"I'm not going to recommend we do it another year — at least not in the same format," said Haack, who thinks the concept may be "overdone."

"I think we have to come up with different ideas."

In its second season, Plymouth Town Hall hopes to break even this year for the first time. But the buildup has been slow and has left organizers wondering if they picked the right way to raise funds for the Plymouth Community Family YMCA.

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Town hall schedules

Area town halls will feature a varied group of performers.

Scheduled are:
PONTIAC-OAKLAND TOWN HALL — Nov. 8, foreign correspondent Richard Valeriani on "World News in Retrospect"; Jan. 11, Dr. Murray Banks on "What to Do Until the Psychiatrist Comes"; and Feb. 8, anchorman Mort Orlin on "How to Make Life Bigger."

Talks are at 10:30 a.m. in Roma Hall, Bloomfield Hills, followed by celebrity luncheon. For tickets, call 478-2394 or 478-4544.
ROCHESTER TOWN HALL — Oct. 18, actress Celeste Holm; Nov. 17, Weight Watchers area director Florine Mark. The lectures are at 10:30 a.m. in Rochester's Little Theatre, followed by celebrity luncheon in the Rochester Elks Club. For tickets, call 521-4700.

PLYMOUTH TOWN HALL — Oct. 11, astrologer, psychic and radio personality Clem; Nov. 14, anchorman Mort Orlin; Jan. 18, author William S. Burroughs, March 7, author Judith Guest. The 11 a.m. lectures are in Troy High School Performing Arts Center. Luncheon follow in Allyn's Restaurant, Somerset Mall. For tickets, call Troy Adult Education at 478-4111.

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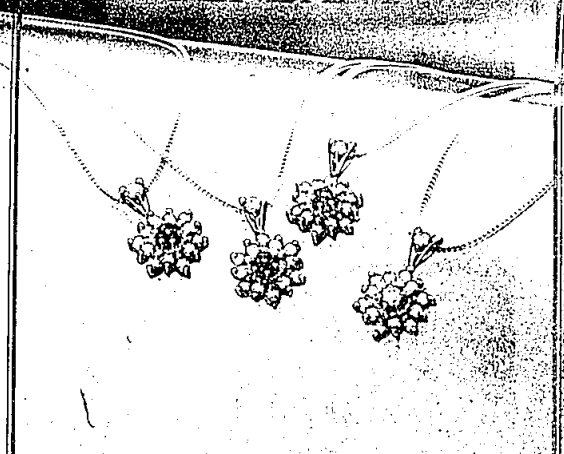
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