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cial events by community arts groups.
During the last year, the art center has been a multicultural mosaic with a perpetual assortment of fine-art and performing-art programs, events, exhibits and concerts.
It has offered venues to a fledgling youth theater company, and musical groups like the

Motor City Brass. Recently, an "International Cafe" series was initiated to celebrate the ethnic foods of cultures in Southfield's melting pot of Jews, Chaldeans, eastern Europeans, southern Asians and African Americans.
For mainstream appeal, the center brought in big-name star Lou Rawls for a concert in early May.

Next season, the center has developed an extensive classic film series, multicultural music concerts and a series of events for kids, including storytelling, folk singing, puppetry and children's musicals.

Being constructive

Not surprisingly, the first year of operation at the art center

hasn't been an obvious or easy transition.
"That's not because of a lack of effort. It's simply a matter of economics, history and what supporters like Robert Martin claim comes from being at the cutting edge."

"We think of ourselves as progressive," said Martin, a member of the Southfield Federation of Arts, composed of nearly 80 arts groups from the area. Many of these one-time nomadic groups, according to Martin, hold regular meetings at the art center.

Not since the Macomb Center for Performing Arts opened in 1982 has a major arts center been unveiled in metro Detroit. The Mount Clemens-based facility is exclusively a performing center. Although it rents space, the Macomb Center isn't driven by a need to reach out to local arts groups.

Indeed, when pushed to make comparisons to other art centers, staunch supporters of the Southfield Center for the Arts are at a loss.

"We have no benchmark," said James Cristiano, chair of the parks and recreation board, which oversees the budget for the division of cultural arts, including the center for the arts.

After one year, the Southfield Center for the Arts is perhaps best described as a work-in-progress with myriad possibilities, and profound challenges. Particularly, the center must further build recognition, increase audiences and attract corporate sponsors and foundation support, said Marlowe Belanger, manager of the cultural arts division.

Belanger, who volunteered in the late 1960s to develop art agencies throughout the state, considers the center's prime goal to educate and offer an affordable way for families to enjoy the arts.

"Our focus is on being constructive rather than destructive," she said. "Everything we do in the arts is about encouragement."

In the long-term, said Belanger, that means the center will offer an ever-growing list of

art-instruction and culture-appreciation course.

Intense scrutiny

Since the city of Southfield purchased and renovated the property for about \$4 million four years ago, the center has been under intense scrutiny both from artists looking for a home and cynics who can't grasp the relationship between art and governmental services.

An additional \$1 million is expected to be raised through grants to finance subsequent renovations and expanded programming. And, a multi-million pie-in-the-sky plan, entitled the Redstone Proposal - which would add a second story to the center - is at least 10 years away, said Belanger.

Debates about the purpose of the center have ranged from using the 65,000-square-foot facility as a community meeting place to promoting the performance, exhibit and rehearsal space as a symbolic bridge connecting the suburbs with Detroit.

"You won't survive if you appeal to only people who live in your area," said Cristiano. "This facility helps bridge Detroit and the suburbs."

While the ongoing physical evolution is quite apparent - classrooms, kitchens and rehearsal spaces have been renovated - the city's understaffed division of cultural arts has a hit-or-miss marketing strategy that has left some wondering why the "word hasn't gotten out" about concerts and exhibits.

Perhaps that criticism is unfair considering typical first-year trial-and-error experiences.

To its credit, Southfield has placed the arts on the same level as other basic city services.

"As our community has matured, we've found that establishing an art center provides for refining the quality of life in Southfield," said city administrator Block.

"Culture in our city existed before (the establishment of the center). But has the center become a cultural meeting place? Undoubtedly, yes."

Not only have the myriad arts groups responded to the accessibility of rehearsal, exhibit and performance space, but the center is showing signs of becoming self-sufficient.

"As we make this facility more available, it'll create greater demand," said Lucius Theus, president of the Federation of Arts.

But Block, ever the cautious administrator, is compelled to qualify the center's ability to fund itself.

"I'm not so sure we'll be profit-making," said Block, who estimates that the center might break even in four years.

Renting the center's spacious conference room and classrooms to businesses could provide much-needed additional revenue, said Block.

"We have an evolving plan (for the center)," he said. "We've been careful not to over-promise. We need to make improvements before we start talking about the center as the most outstanding place."

Sense of community
Perhaps the most appropriate view of the center, according to Block, is to consider it one of the many ingredients to enhance the quality of life.

"The suburban planning of the 1970s has produced a fragmentation," said Block. "People are looking for a sense of community. That's what we're providing."

It's what arts advocate Martin calls "the need to be touched" in the impersonal high-tech, cyber-age.

In Southfield, one of the most culturally diverse cities in the region, the art center's unspoken objective is to promote harmony, said Bill Waterhouse, director of Southfield parks and recreation department.

"The arts cross every racial and ethnic group," he said. "Art can touch all types of people." Apparently, it can even inspire a bureaucrat encircled by a stained-glass work of art to talk like an aesthetic theorist.

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