

# FAC-CC collaboration seems inevitable

Since an opaque Spress release earlier in the year, there haven't been any official updates concerning the proposed merger between the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and Colorado College. Yet it's clear that negotiations are moving forward, since the FAC is now officially in play. And as anyone who follows Wall Street knows, once a company is in play, it can never go back to the status quo ante.



**John HAZLEHURST**

After talking with several current and former Colorado College and FAC employees, none of whom would speak on the record, it's clear that longstanding systemic problems at the FAC left the city's iconic art museum and performing arts center with few options.

When former CEO Michael De Marsche came to the FAC in 2002, he focused on two goals: Creating excitement at the fading institution by scheduling exhibitions and events with universal appeal, and reviving the long-dormant plans to build an addition to the cramped, aging building.

Five years later, De Marsche had finished the job. Exhibitions featuring Andy Warhol, Peter Max and Dale Chihuly were extraordinarily successful, helping

create and sustain an energetic \$28.4 million fundraising campaign for the new addition. Led by Katherine Loo and Buck Blessing, the campaign met its goals, thanks to the generosity of individual donors and strong foundation support. Springs resident Tim Hoiles made a \$3.5 million gift to renovate the theater in 2005, and others made gifts of five, six and even seven figures.

The August 2007 gala opening featured art world celebrities such as Thomas Hoving, John Waters and Joel Gray. It was a glorious bash, one that seemed to signal the birth of a new era at the FAC — but didn't.

A few days later, De Marsche quit. He was a builder, not a manager. The day-to-day slog of running a medium-sized nonprofit didn't interest him, so he went off to Armenia to build another art museum. (He later returned to America and now is executive director at the Catalina Island Museum off the California coast.)

In 2008, the FAC hired Sam Gappmayer, who brought a different management style — and whose tenure overlapped the Great Recession. The excitement seemed to vanish overnight — no more First Thursday parties in the galleries, no more blockbuster exhibitions, no more soaring ambitions. The FAC scaled back De Marsche's grandiose ambitions, hoping to build a sustainable future. Five years later Gappmayer quit, taking a job in Peoria, Ill. The FAC board

named businesswoman Nechie Hall as interim CEO, and Hall moved quickly and aggressively. She hired a half-dozen new staff members and scheduled an ambitious Georgia O'Keefe exhibition for the summer of 2015. Hoping to duplicate the phenomenal success of De Marsche's Chihuly show (which had 71,000 attendees), Hall spent more than \$200,000 on advertising and promotion.

The exhibition didn't exactly flop, but it fell short of Hall's revenue expectations, which reportedly included \$20,000 from valet parking. Even before David Dahlin was installed as permanent CEO, it was clear the FAC was in serious trouble.

In the past year, the FAC has tapped its eponymous foundation for \$1.5 million in operating support. At that rate, the foundation's assets will be depleted in a few years.

The 1936 building isn't energy-efficient. It requires sophisticated, expensive HVAC systems to protect the art and artifacts. According to one source, monthly utility bills are often more than \$30,000, and the FAC sorely needs to catch up with deferred maintenance.

But even though it may seem that the FAC is a mere supplicant, a beautiful poor girl hooking up with a kindly sugar

daddy, that's hardly the case.

"You want to know what this really is?" asked a former FAC employee. "It's the biggest gift that any liberal arts college has ever received."

By acquiring the FAC, Colorado College will vault into the top tier of liberal arts institutions. Colleges such as Wesleyan and Williams have distinguished small art museums with modest collections, but none approach the FAC in sophistication, breadth and national reputation.

Combined with the Cornerstone Center across the street, CC's assets in the visual and performing arts will eclipse those of any of its peers.

The FAC will benefit from economies of scale in maintenance, administration and facility upgrades. With its

\$800 million endowment, CC can afford to invest in energy efficiency, staff consolidation and program expansion.

Unshackled from narrow budgetary constraints, the FAC will be infused with new energy and vitality. The institution will evolve, just as elite colleges continuously change to meet the challenges of the future and the needs of the young.

Amherst, Wesleyan, Williams — watch out.

There's a new sheriff in town. • *CSBJ*

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