

# News of the Week

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CITY

## Victoria Hall Theater Closed

### Board Cites Safety Issues as Unity Shoppe Contests Decision

BY CHARLES DONEGAN

Victoria Hall Theater closed until further notice last week due to a warning about the building's structural deficiencies. Structural engineering firm Philen Spiess & Haight prepared the report, which was commissioned as part of the due diligence involved in the potential leasing of the theater by the Ensemble Theatre Company (ETC). On the morning of April 28, Victoria Hall Theater Executive Director David Brainard sent an email addressed to friends and clients of the theater announcing the immediate closure of the building at the order of Roger Hand, director of Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). The message says "structural problems identified by building engineers make the building unsafe for public occupancy." Victoria Hall, which is at 33 West Victoria Street, was built in 1921 and received its most recent renovation in 2003. In addition to the theater, which serves as a public benefit venue for the city and surrounding areas, the building also houses three nonprofit organizations: Unity Shoppe, Child Abuse Listening Mediation (CALM), and RSVP. Activities in areas of Victoria Hall other than the theater space are not affected by the closure.

The decision was arrived at after four of the six members of the building's board, including two community members not affiliated with the nonprofits that co-own the property, voted to limit their liability in case of a potential accident by putting a temporary stop to public use of the theater. Brainard's message on behalf of this majority goes on to quote from a phone conversation with architect Steven Metsch on the night of April 27 in which Metsch is reported to have said that while the building is not subject to "imminent collapse in the next rainstorm," significant seismic activity in the area would be likely to cause "catastrophic roof collapse and loss of life." The full report from the structural engineers cites the removal of an interior wall in the period prior to current ownership and other issues to do with age of the Hall's plaster ceiling as the primary areas of concern.

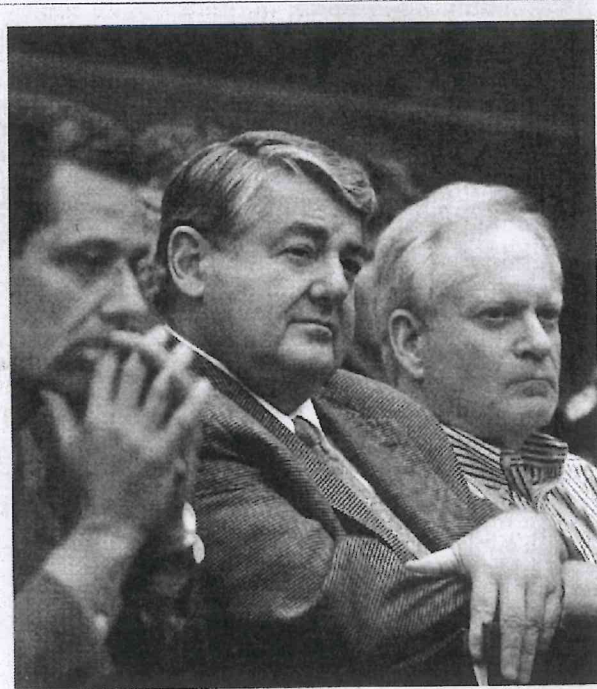
The announcement comes on the heels of a months-long dispute in which the Unity Shoppe has rejected plans to lease the theater to Ensemble Theatre Company. Unity contends that, despite an original agreement that the disposition of the property, which is held by three area charities—CALM, RSVP, and Unity Shoppe—should be decided by a majority vote of the Victoria Street Community House (VSCCH) board, the recent decision to lease to Ensemble Theatre Company is not in the best interests of their organization, the facility, or the community.

In response to the announcement of the theater's closure, Tom Reed, executive director of Unity Shoppe, issued a statement under the heading "Do you want to know the rest of the story 4/29/10." Reed contends that the report cited is dated November 4, 2009, and that the closing of the theater is both unnecessary and

motivated by reasons other than public safety. Reed questions the timing of the announcement and the decision, and asserts that the negative judgments regarding the building's structural integrity cited by Brainard have been taken out of context from a much longer document that includes contradictory evidence regarding these claims. Reed ties the report to the Ensemble Theatre's plans to remodel the building, and concludes that the warnings only apply in the event of such renovation. While allowing that "needed repairs for building safety would be done" were Unity to gain full control, Reed claims that the decision is based on the fact that "Ensemble wants to discourage Unity's effort to save this wonderful historic building."

These accusations by Unity Shoppe against its partner nonprofits come at a time when sources close to the deal with Ensemble Theatre Com-

pany see it as on the verge of becoming a reality. Rich Schuette, president of the board at CALM, denies any connection between the closing of the theater and the arbitration with Unity over the lease to ETC. Citing Unity's refusal to accept sole responsibility for the public's safety if the theater were to remain open, Schuette expressed regret over Reed's interpretation and its implications. "We are all in favor of the mission of Unity Shoppe, and we would like to see this resolved amicably; but once you know about something like these structural issues with the Hall, you have to act, because otherwise, if anything happens, you can be shown to have known about it beforehand." What options Unity Shoppe has left to reverse the closure or block the pending lease agreement, which passed the VSCCH board by vote in the fall of 2009, remain to be seen.



## Botanic Garden Waiting Game

Despite hopes that something might be decided by the end of an all-day hearing on Tuesday, the future of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden remains in bureaucratic limbo, as the county supervisors decided to continue the remaining public comments and deliberations on the controversial "Vital Mission Plan" until May 18. That leaves both the garden's administration (including director Edward Schneider, center, and board chair Fife Symington, far right) waiting anxiously yet again for a final decision to be made, as the plan's been making rounds before various county agencies for nearly five years now.

—Matt Kettmann