

"If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."

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The Arts Campus at Willits opens doors of new facility

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By Christine Benedetti Special to the Aspen Daily News

It might not be the circus-like grand opening that organizers planned, but the midvalley is officially home to a permanent performing arts venue as of today.

The Arts Campus at Willits opens the doors of its new facility this evening with a performance from a Denver-based indie band, The Still Tide. TACAW received its certificate of occupancy Sept. 16.

After a few staff members came down with COVID-19 in early September and with valley cases on the rise, the team made the decision to transition the grand opening from a weekend-long extravaganza featuring a rotating door of entertainment to a more controlled set of performances, which also includes comedic trio The Grawlix on Saturday.

"It feels great. It will feel better when it's full of people having a great time," said Ryan Honey, TACAW's executive director, on a recent tour of the new 10,000-square-foot facility in the Willits Town Center.

The building is about a decade in the making, said Richard Carter, a TACAW board



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Molly Briggs/Aspen Daily News

member who was part of initial conversations in 2011 to build a sculpture center, in partnership with Anderson Ranch Arts Center, on the property. When the Willits development was created 20 years ago, a dedicated arts parcel was set aside and a real estate transfer assessment was established to finance a future arts and culture compound. Proposals such as the sculpture center were first floated, but those evolved over several years.

"They [Anderson Ranch] didn't want to leave their campus," Carter said. "We said, 'how about performing arts' and such ideas are born right?"

Carter, a longtime valley

resident, artist and founder of the Aspen Art Museum, along with Marc Breslin, Michael Lipkin and Julia Marshall, began the visioning process for what's now TACAW, the nonprofit that was officially formed in 2015. (Lipkin is currently TACAW's board vice president, and Marshall is the board president.)

In 2016, Honey was hired as the organization's first employee. TACAW signed a 99-year lease on the parcel in 2017, and opened The Temporary, a pop-up performing arts venue in a vacant building nearby, which hosted 240 events over its two-year run, closing in 2019

when its lease wasn't renewed.

"We thought when we closed The Temporary it was a crisis," Carter said, "but what it did was it kicked our ass to start this."

TACAW broke ground in July 2020, and 15 months later, its \$7 million, net-zero facility, dubbed The Contemporary, was completed.

"Add a pandemic, and time flies," Honey said.

The facility is home to a multi-use theater that can host 245 guests seated, 180 cabaret-style or 400 standing. The building also has a dedicated rehearsal room, an open lobby and community space with a full bar that opens to a covered patio terrace, a catering kitchen, full office suite, an artists' green room and expansive lawn and outdoor area that doubles as a performance space. It's one of the first net-zero carbon performing arts venues in the country, and instead of natural gas, it's powered by rooftop solar.

This building is phase one of a three-part development. Phase two of the campus plans anticipate a fixed-seat performance hall that would attach to the lobby. Phase three will potentially offer services such as artists' studio space, nonprofit offices and more community use space.

Financing was funded through Colorado Educational and Cultural Facilities Authority, a quasi-governmental agency

that has the authority to issue municipal bond debt. The local bond issuer is Alpine Bank. The nonprofit was able to raise almost \$5 million in private donations, and has \$2.9 million remaining to pay off, says Honey.

And while they will continue to raise money for the debt and future development, right now, the focus is on learning to operate the new building and determining the right programming mix. The stage, which is the size of the Wheeler Opera House's, is set up to be flexible in use.

"Ultimately, we'll be doing stuff five nights a week, in a mixture of music, comedy, idea-based programming and hosting other people's events, including daytime stuff as well," Kendall Smith, TACAW's director of programming, said. "We will learn as we go, seeing what the community appetite is and what people are responding to."

This list of uses also includes film, theater, dance and private events. Smith acknowledges that being a center for the Latino community is a goal, too. Already on the calendar are two nights of Nuestras Voces, an original theater project performed in Spanish (Oct. 16-17); the entire website is available in both English and Spanish as well.

In addition to tonight's concert, the weekend includes

Denver-based comedy trio The Grawlix on Saturday evening. On Sunday, they will record a live podcast taping of their show. Other October dates include a children's short film festival (Oct. 9), an author talk with Casey Gerald (Oct. 19) and Consensual Improv (Oct. 23), among other events.

"We are the geographical center of the valley. ...We really have a great community. It's very sophisticated and everybody still loves art, and they don't want to necessarily drive back up the valley at night," Carter said.

And now, they don't need to commute for entertainment, either.

"I am excited to see what people want," Smith said.