

The Arts Campus at Willits commits to staging performances

FRIDAY, JANUARY 7, 2022

Andrew Travers

Must the show go on?

A patchwork of approaches to staging performances has emerged this winter in the Roaring Fork Valley, a mix of cancellations and new protocols in the face of a surge of coronavirus infections that tops any time during the pandemic.

The city-owned Wheeler Opera House has canceled all of its bookings since Christmas. Privately operated music venue Belly Up Aspen has forged ahead, staying open at full capacity with vaccinations required for all attendees through a string of mostly sold-out shows since mid-December, though anecdotal evidence suggests many tickets are going unused — allowing for some social distancing instead of shoulder-to-shoulder audiences.

The Arts Campus at Willits (TACAW), a midvalley nonprofit venue and the newest stage in Colorado ski country, after a handful of fall and winter cancellations, is now committing to staying open and putting shows on stage with a new regime of health and safety protocols in place.

“A big lesson from the pandemic has been that it’s really critical for communities to be able to gather and have shared experiences,” executive director Ryan Honey said. “And that’s TACAW’s role in this community.”

This Saturday’s performance by the a capella group The Whiffenpoofs of Yale begins a January run of high-profile and locals-centric shows on weekends, including a concert from



The Arts Campus at Willits (TACAW) will host several indoor events this month. (Aubree Dallas/Courtesy TACAW)

the Colorado jam band Leftover Salmon (Jan. 14, TACAW’s first sell-out event), locally based Consensual Improv (Jan. 15), stand-up comedian Caitlin Peluffo (Jan. 21) and rock band The Unlikely Candidates (Jan. 22).

The venue, in the works for two decades as part of the Willits development in Basalt, has had its entire brick-and-mortar existence defined by the pandemic. Construction broke ground in June 2020, at the near-lowpoint of pandemic lockdown in the U.S. It completed its building last year but did not open to the public due to the pandemic, instead hosting a popular free outdoor concert series on its lawn. Its September grand opening events, which were to bring audiences inside for the first time, were canceled due to the emergence of the delta variant. And a string of shows were canceled in the fall due to outbreaks among the ranks of the venue’s small staff.

Then, as the omicron variant spread in late December, the venue canceled its planned New Year’s Eve party.

Now, with input from its public health consultant Dr. Brooke Allen and from Eagle County’s public health department, TACAW’s board and staff have come up with a new regime of protocols to stay open and continue producing shows while keeping audiences, staff and performers as safe as possible.

“We feel really good about the protocols that we have in place to make sure that we can create a safe space for people to gather,” said Honey.

The venue will continue to require proof of full vaccination for audience members, require face coverings, require all staff to wear N95 or KN-95 masks while encouraging attendees to do the same (these

more effective masks will be available at the door), while eliminating all food service and limiting bar service to canned drinks while encouraging people to drink through straws while not removing masks, and imposing some distancing at all events.

Building the performing arts center, and the main stage known as The Contemporary, during the pandemic allowed architect Michael Lipkin and the TACAW team to construct the space with COVID in mind, creating a ventilation system that filters out all air in the space every 12 minutes.

In announcing the new protocols, Honey and TACAW board chair Julia Marshall made an appeal to the community to keep one another safe and keep the venue open.

“We realize that some of you will not come to TACAW at the moment, and we look forward to seeing you when you are ready,” they wrote in a Dec. 31 e-mail blast. “For those that are planning to join us, we need your help. To continue programming during this current wave and manage whatever else COVID throws at us, it’s going to take a community effort. Please follow our protocols and respect the requests of our staff when attending an event. If we all do our part, we can continue to come together for music, comedy, theater, and more.”

The nonprofit has also quietly been raising additional funds from supporters to make up the shortfall of earned ticket revenue due to the pandemic’s cancellations and limitations.

“We’ve gone to our donors to say, ‘Listen, we’re trying to do the right thing for the community in this moment and this is what we think it looks like,’” Honey explained. “‘And that’s going to mean we need additional support from all of you to make this work.’ And our donors have been fantastic in stepping up.”

Many more performing arts venues have closed than have opened in the U.S. over the 21 months of pandemic challenges to performing



TACAW during its free outdoor concert series in summer 2021. (Courtesy TACAW)

arts and gathering places in the U.S. Exceedingly few were built and opened during that period, as TACAW has, making the nonprofit something of a potential test case for the industry as it finds a way forward.

“We’re not trying to be the national standard,” Honey said. “But I think we’re trying to always ask the question, ‘What’s the right thing for our community? And how do we do it?’”