

## Keeping the curtain raised: TheatreWorks Florida using old Davenport School of the Arts campus

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DAVENPORT — The curtain hasn't closed on the old Davenport School of the Arts campus.

TheatreWorks Florida moved in late last year and now the nonprofit theater company is planning performances of "Schoolhouse Rock Live!" in the school's theater that hasn't been used in four years.

The company is making use of the dance studio, black box theater and amphitheater that seats up to 180 people, which has sparked new conversations about the old school's future.

"Theater companies search years for something like this," said Scott Cook, TheatreWorks Florida's artistic producer. "The school left behind an incredible building."

The Davenport School of the Arts moved to its new, \$38 million campus near Loughman in 2011.

Other organizations want to find uses for the old campus, too.

In July, Abel Gonzales, TheatreWorks Florida's company manager and a member of Davenport's School Task Force Committee, presented the City Commission with a proposed plan for the school — now being referred to by residents as the Davenport Community Campus — that goes beyond TheatreWorks Florida.

The company, along with organizations including the Davenport Historical Society and Davenport Arts and Cultural Alliance, have joined TheatreWorks Florida under one marketing campaign called Imagine Davenport. Its goal is to develop the campus into an arts, culture and recreation center.

What TheatreWorks Florida is already doing at the campus serves as the first phase of a three-phase plan the committee asked commissioners to take to the Polk County School Board.

The company started its TheatreCares program there in October.

TheatreCares is a community outreach program that receives funding from National Endowment of the Arts and United Arts of Central Florida grants to put on full-scale theatrical performances for audiences that are physically, financially or otherwise challenged. The company's first show, "Winter Wonderettes," toured local senior



MICHAEL WILSON / THE LEDGER

The cast of TheatreWorks Florida's production of "Schoolhouse Rock Live!" are, from left, Robb Ross, Katrina Johnson, Candy Marilyn Heller and Kariss Barber.

homes in December.

"Schoolhouse Rock Live!" will tour theaters in Polk and Orange counties free of charge in September. The show, based on the 1970s cartoon with the popular songs "Just A Bill" and "Conjunction Junction," targets underserved youth. The show also will have two public performances in the old school's theater.

The company also uses space at the campus for rehearsals and storage.

"The old school is especially useful to us because these shows aren't for profit, they're for the community," Cook said.

A similar rehearsal space would cost at least \$3,000, he said.

The School Task Force Committee's proposal includes the Davenport Arts and Cultural Alliance using a building for art classes and the Davenport Historical Society using the media center for cultural and historical exhibits. It also wants the city to fix up the basketball courts and baseball field, and give permission to use the cafeteria as a banquet hall for special events.

The campus is still property of the School Board, which lends the space to TheatreWorks Florida. The Ridge Career Center uses eight classrooms, operating its Fresh Start, ESOL, GED and adult education programs.

The committee doesn't know how much it would cost to turn the old campus into a community center, but if the School Board wanted to reopen the campus as a school it would cost \$8.5 million, according to Greg Rivers, the district's associate superintendent of operations.

"It does have a lot of potential, but we can't invest any money in it," Mayor Darlene Bradley said.

Commissioners agreed to keep the old school on their radars, but the presentation ended with its future still unclear.

"We don't know what the School Board will do before we get both sides talking, but we can continue to run with the idea," Commissioner Crystal Williams said.

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