

By Chris Hewitt
 chewitt@pioneerpress.com

December 8, 2011

Ordway unveils designs for \$75 million expansion, new concert hall

If the announced concert hall at the Ordway is a wooden "bento box," as St. Paul Chamber Orchestra President Sarah Lutman has called it, think of the audience as the rice and the SPCO as a very nice piece of salmon nestled inside.

The 1,100-seat hall, plans for which were unveiled at a news conference Thursday, will replace the under-used McKnight Theatre, which has been the home of theatrical productions such as "Grey Gardens." When the hall opens - if all goes as planned, in spring 2014 - it will be the new home of the SPCO. It will feature a design in which the audience surrounds the orchestra, and both audience and orchestra are wrapped in honey-colored wood that includes an enormous, curvy, wooden "ribbon" that extends from the back of the hall over the audience.

Efforts to raise \$75 million for the project continue, with \$51.75 million already raised from public, corporate and private sources, including a \$3 million commitment from the city of St. Paul and \$16 million in bonding funds from the state.

Lowell Noteboom, co-chair of the Arts Partnership campaign that includes the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, the Minnesota Opera, the SPCO and the Schubert Club, said the goal is to complete fundraising by March 31, 2012, and break ground shortly thereafter.

One thing that won't disappear with the renovation: the Ordway's glass second-floor lobby that looks out over Rice Park.

"We literally were told not to screw that up," said lead architect

Tim Carl, who displayed drawings that show the glass front will extend all the way across the front of the Ordway, replacing a two-story brick tower, and will wrap around the Fifth Street side of the building.

By providing a new home for the SPCO, the renovation will free up dates in the Ordway's 1,900-seat main theater calendar. Members of the Arts Partnership have long competed for open dates in that space, which is so in demand for bookings that president and CEO Patricia Mitchell has said, "You can't get a toothpick in there from Labor Day to June."

The main theater will remain open, and it will look the same to visitors, but it, too, will get some new bells and whistles, including a three-story "support space" west of the stage, with offices and dressing rooms.

Ordway officials are estimating the renovation will increase attendance by 130,000 a year and will have an additional economic impact of \$6.1 million.

Chris Hewitt can be reached at 651-228-5552.



The interior design for an expansion project at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts. (Ordway Center for the Performing Arts)



The exterior design for an expansion project at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts. (Ordway Center for the Performing Arts)