

Testimony to Joint Ways and Means Committee
Cultural Resources Economic Fund (CREF) Request

Greetings to Co-Chairs Rayfield, Steiner-Hayward and Johnson and members of the Committee

My name is Aletha Bonebrake. I am Chair of the Baker Orpheum Theatre Building Committee, sponsored by Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre Inc, in Baker City.

Thank you for opportunity to speak to our Budget Request under the Cultural Resources Economic Fund. The Baker Orpheum Theatre is one of 11 statewide capital projects selected by the Cultural Advocacy Committee of the Oregon Cultural Trust to recommend for funding in the upcoming biennium. This capital project will benefit our very rural county seat of 9,800 people in a county of 16,800 and small towns in the region by supporting all our local performing artists in choirs, orchestras and community theater, and our children's participation in three summer Missoula Children's theater productions funded by our local Crossroads Arts Center. It will also provide a suitable stage for attracting traveling artists which play the circuit of restored historic theaters in small communities throughout America on their way between bookings in metropolitan areas. Artists contact us with their schedules but always bypass Baker City when they realize we have no venue they are willing to play.

The Baker Orpheum Theatre plans drawn up for a 325-seat theater in the heart of downtown will be built into an acoustically excellent and professionally equipped theater for local performing arts groups, traveling performing artists and community gatherings. It will contribute to the economic tourism that has grown and thrived with development of Historic Main Street boutiques, artists' studios, distilleries and restaurants. Visitors will come for national performers, will eat out, and perhaps stay overnight and remain to explore the wilderness trails, skiing, rafting and other outdoor experiences of our rural environment.

Exactly 5 years ago in May, a local citizen gave the Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre (EORT) \$130,000 to purchase a building on Main Street which began in 1912 as vaudeville stage and served as a theater until 1958. EORT hired an architect to produce the Feasibility Study we

follow in Phasing the total \$2.3 million renovation. To date we have raised over \$650,000, of which \$355,500 is from local individual gifts. We have completed Phase IV and are ready to begin structural upgrades for seismic integrity, construction of balcony, fly loft and staircases.

When Baker County lost its timber and mining industry base it found that tourism for its historic Baker City downtown and outdoor adventures became an economic engine to stabilize its workforce and way of life. Baker City population has been between 7,200 and 9,800 for over a century. For the past 20 years Baker City has transformed its Main Street with historic building restoration projects housing small businesses and second story living quarters. The continued revitalization of these properties assures the survival of the downtown core against commercial sprawl and it appeals to tourist trade. Baker City needs an economy that provides a tax base able to support new schools, city services and other civic amenities. Economic development brings families, small manufacturing and workforce development. Historic Baker City was formed to meet these goals and the theater project is a perfect fit.

Reclaiming the building as a performing arts theater was the dream of this one man who loved the theater then and supports the local performing arts now. The availability of the historic space coincided with the Regional Theater's mission to acquire a permanent performing arts stage for Baker City. The theater's philanthropist has also set up an OCF donor-advised fund to underwrite the cost in the future of bringing nationally known artists to Baker City so that tickets will be affordable to local citizens.

Next to providing a quality space for civic gatherings and for local artists to perform, and for enhancing economic tourism, the third great value from this project is promoting cultural equity in rural Oregon. Baker City is 125 miles from any major urban center which makes it costly and difficult to freely access live entertainment, such as Broadway shows, concert series and live bands. The theater will attract national performing artists to play in Baker as they tour the rural circuits, and its 325 seats can provide a large enough gate to support their fees. EORT is developing this center to be a community auditorium for use by city and schools as well. This theater will provide the only quality acoustical venue in the County.

There is anecdotal evidence reported that successfully reclaimed historic theaters bring cultural energy and diverse programming to the community, successes that have had a significant economic impact on the area where they are sited.

It is well known that with increased attraction of the town as a place to raise a family there will be increased interest for dentists, nurses, tech business growth, online business entrepreneurs to settle. This growth in services and infrastructure brings more families and business, all of which increase the tax base and the civic and educational amenities, as well as diversifying the population base, and fueling a cycle of population and income growth.

Working with all partners in the community we are creating a space that can be used by all and impact what they bring to our common life. Our role in the community will be as a unique partner with our arts and civic colleagues. EORT will manage and provide operating costs.

Returning this remembered space to an historical interpretation of its mid-20th century heyday cements its significance as a theater occupying its historic position in the row of shops and services still comprising the 1889 building complex, most of which has retained its original architecture as the heart of Historic Baker City, and a strong tourist destination. The new Baker Orpheum Theatre will become one more precious asset in the crown of the Queen City.

We are asking for your support for the Cultural Advocacy Coalition's list of projects for Cultural Resources Economic Funding. These large projects will help build an enduring future for their communities.

Thank you for your time in considering this one-time funding for these capital projects.