

Barn has starring role

Two nonprofits plan for the future

by Lynn Woike
Editor

"It's funny how similar a wedding is to a theater," agreed Susan Pribyson and Donna Sennott.

Both make use of a stage, a sound system and seating for guests.

That's why the Gifts of Love executive director and the Theatre Guild of Simsbury president are working together in the hopes of renovating one of the barns on the Community Farm of Simsbury.

"We have one very large barn that has basically just been used for storage for many years and it's falling apart," Pribyson said.

It is one of the outbuildings on the farm run by Gifts of Love.

The farm has been around since the 1600s.

"In 1882, Amos R. Eno deeded the farm to the town of Simsbury for the purpose of feeding the poor. It's a town poor farm. Back then, if you couldn't feed your family, you moved onto the farm and worked the land so that your family had food, but that went away when welfare was introduced," she said.

Over the years, the property and the farm have had different owners. In 2013, the Community Farm merged with Gifts of Love, which now operates an organic farm on the 77 acres.

"We grow produce to provide Simsbury Social Services, Gifts of Love food pantry and some shelters in Hartford," Pribyson said.

Joe Buda, president of the Simsbury Historical Society and chair of the town's tourism committee, knew that the farm needed to generate revenue and proposed turning the barn into a multi-purpose event site. Matt Wittmer of Phase Zero Design had consulted with the Theatre Guild of Simsbury in the past to look at properties that

could become theaters. Knowing that TGS had considered a barn in Simsbury, he connected the two organizations.

The two nonprofits immediately saw the possibilities and recognized that not only would they each benefit, the town would also benefit. It would protect the farm, allowing it to continue feeding people in need; it would give the theater a place to call home; and it would give the community another event space while freeing up the spaces the theater had rented.

Although the theater has been in existence for 44 years, it's never had its own physical home.

"We use multiple sites throughout town including the public library, Simsbury High School, the Methodist church, a warehouse that we're renting, Town Hall, Eno Hall. Some are free, some have fees associated with them," Sennott said. "When we have a place to hang our shingle, we become more identifiable, and it's easier for our actors, volunteers and audience to find us."

As a user of community space, she knows the town of Simsbury has limited offerings. Rather than paying to rent them, the theater would help offset operating expenses of the farm.

The committee working on the project is made up of Pribyson and Sennott, Buda, Wittmer, Gifts of Love grant writer Douglas Sacks and town building official Henry Miga.

The committee's next step is to create three- and five-year business plans. A consultant from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving will help formulate those plans and assure the venue can cover costs. It's hoped the plan is completed before April 2019.

Only then will the committee pursue corporations that would be interested in investing in a new community space with seating for 150-200, Pribyson said.

Gifts of Love wants to be sure the project does not take from donations that have been given to other projects, so it will be expanding the pool it turns to for donations.

It will also be looking for others who care about the old barn and would like to see it used.

With minimal adjustments, the one location can serve both organizations as well as the community.

Gifts of Love has proposed farm-to-table dinners, the town's 350th anniversary celebration, weddings, parties, corporate outings and meet-

ings. The Theatre Guild envisions holding dinner theater and home productions. Both could expand their educational programs.

"The town has been very supportive, but has made it clear they do not have the fiscal resources to donate to it," Pribyson said.

Once operational, she said the revenue it generates will help maintain the farm.

The interior of the historic barn will be preserved.

"The structure of the interior is what's so gorgeous and unique to the period that you wouldn't want to lose that with Sheetrock. We want to preserve the interior. The inside is actually in good condition. It's the external structure that is falling apart," Sennott said.

Pribyson explained, "Before it can be used, we will need to add the structural support, and then we need to insulate the structure and what we're going to do, which other barn owners have done, is insulate from the outside and then put a new structure on the outside so the integrity of the internal barn is not disrupted. We don't want to change the inside other than to add lighting and bathrooms."

Phase I, to be completed by the fall of 2020, includes insulation, wiring for heating and cooling, two additional egresses, additional bathrooms, a small catering kitchen, windows and lighting – estimated at \$1 million to \$1.5 million.



Photo by Anna Zuckerman-Vidovecko

"The structure of the interior is what's so gorgeous and unique to the period that you wouldn't want to lose that with Sheetrock."
– Donna Sennott

An effort is underway to convert a large barn on the Community Farm, currently used for storage, into a revenue-generating multi-purpose community venue.



Courtesy photo

Phase II would add air conditioning, heat and increase the parking area at a cost of \$.5 million to \$1 million.

A structural engineer gave the green light to go ahead with the project.

"We just have to put some additional supports in the lower part of the barn, but then it could support the project that we're pursuing," Pribyson said.

"We have looked at others," she said. "Our grant writer has been involved with the Webb barn in Wethersfield. The difference is that it does not have heating, so it's only seasonal. It seats 125 people. They run about 50 events from April to October."

Even though it will be insulated and heated for use year-round, and they will promote agritourism, they don't expect to hold as many events.

"During the summer we have a seven-week summer camp and it is a farm and it will continue to be a working farm," Pribyson said.

"Small farms are closing throughout Connecticut and unless they find an additional revenue stream, they're not going to continue. We need something to keep the farm sustainable," she said.

Sacks agreed, saying, "Connecticut farms and farmland are in crisis. The state loses significant acreage of arable land each year to development, failed farms and farmers aging out of agriculture. Just a few months ago, a seventh-generation dairy farm dating back to the early 1800s ceased operation as it couldn't find a way to be profitable.

"The Gifts of Love farm is highly significant as both a historical farm – dating to 1675 and belonging to the family of Roger Wolcott, Connecticut's Colonial governor – and as a unique model for how farmland can and should be utilized to serve many purposes. The farm grows organic crops; 42 percent is distributed at four area food pantries and shelters. The farm also serves as an educational center and summer camp providing instruction in STEM-based concepts, agriculture, conservation, ecology and animal husbandry."

"Like many Connecticut farms," he said, "it struggles to



Donna Sennott and Susan Pribyson share a dream of using the old barn.

reach profitability so its future sustainability is in question. Utilizing the dairy barn, dating to 1883, as an event center will not only serve Simsbury as a valued community asset for local organizations and every resident, but can generate significant rental revenue, which can be 'plowed' back into the farm operation ensuring its vitality and sustainability for years to come."

"This is a pretty big project so we are thrilled to partner with the Theatre Guild of Simsbury. I think it's a really good combination.

"We're trying to add a resource, not take away," Pribyson said.

For the project to proceed, a change of use will be needed from the Zoning Commission.

"The option is to let it sit and rot," Sennott said.

Calling it a "diamond in the rough," she said, "there are other barns in New England that are used for theaters, so we have other places to look at."

Pribyson said, "I think the two most important things are preserving a historical monument in Simsbury and the second thing is providing an additional community center. The town of Simsbury is growing – just look at all the housing units they're putting up. Donna doesn't have a place to put on her productions and she's not the only one who's run into a lack of space for community events."

The committee welcomes the expertise and services of financial, architectural, building professionals and other volunteers to make it happen.

"We have had two farms offer lumber from barns that were torn down. Any in-kind donations we can get to help with the cost, whether it's the labor services, or goods and materials, we welcome all of it," Pribyson said. **VL**

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