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Wells Fargo Center for the Arts announces facilities renovations to begin in May 2013

Theater and backstage upgrades launch phase one of \$10 million “Bridge to the Future” project

Santa Rosa, CA (March 28, 2013) – The Board of Directors of the non-profit Luther Burbank Memorial Foundation, which owns and operates Wells Fargo Center for the Arts, today announced plans for a four-phase project to upgrade facilities, improve patron and artist experience, increase accessibility, and allow greater programmatic flexibility at the 31 year-old arts and events center. The project is estimated to cost \$10 million and includes the creation of a building reserve fund to allow for ongoing maintenance and improvements. The first phase of the “Bridge to the Future” project will begin in mid-May with a \$2.8 million renovation of the Ruth Finley Person Theater, and will be completed by mid-August, in time for the start of the Center’s 2013 – 14 season, which will be announced in May. During the construction period, the 1600-seat theater will be closed for performances; events such as the “18th Annual Sonoma County Pride Comedy Night,” Roustabout Theater’s summer performances, and the Center’s summer art, music, and drama camps for children will continue in other venues within the Center’s 140,000 square foot complex.

“We’re looking ahead with great excitement to the next 30 years,” says Sherry Swayne, Chair of the Board of Directors. “The ‘Bridge to the Future’ project is a result of ongoing visioning and strategic planning processes begun by the Board in 2007. As our programming and audiences have grown over the past 31 years, this renovation is the next logical step in our evolution.”

The first phase of construction is made possible by generous donations from the Ernest L. and Ruth W. Finley Foundation, Lytton Rancheria – Lytton Band of Pomo Indians, Alan and Susan Seidenfeld, an anonymous donor, and the Board of Directors of the Luther Burbank Memorial Foundation. “Evert and Ruth Finley Person were among the founders of the center more than 30 years ago. This new gift is intended to help it thrive for the next

30 years,” said Norma Person, president of the Ernest L. and Ruth W. Finley Foundation, which made the inaugural gift to the project.

The project is led by Berkeley-based ELS Architecture and Design, whose work at the Center began with the 2010 renovation of the Lytton Rancheria Grand Lobby, and whose past theatrical projects include the Nokia Theatre in Los Angeles, San Jose’s California Theatre, and the Roda Theatre at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Construction will be performed by Shook & Waller Construction, Inc., who also worked on the 2010 Lytton Rancheria Grand Lobby renovation. Key improvements to be made this summer include removal of two piano storage barns on either side of the stage, which can currently obstruct as many as 120 seats from seeing a full view of performances; the addition of eight feet of ceiling space above the stage, allowing productions to more easily accommodate scenic and technical elements; and the revision of balcony soffits and railings, which will improve sightlines for those seated in the balcony and improve sound quality. Balcony seats will be refurbished to improve comfort, while on the orchestra level entirely new seats will be installed, which will not only provide greater comfort to patrons and include amenities like cup holders, but will also allow for easy removal, enabling the Center to expand its programming to concerts and events requiring an open floor and general admission. In addition, many technical elements will be replaced; new speakers, processors and digital sound mixing boards will be installed; and stage and house lighting will be upgraded to improve way-finding.

“Being new to the community and coming from a much larger city, we immediately connected with the Center because of the quality and diversity of its programming,” say Alan and Susan Seidenfeld, major donors to the project. “We could see the challenges inherent in the facility, and wanted to help make the upgrades to improve everyone’s experience.”

Originally constructed as home to the Christian Life Center in the 1970s, the building has several idiosyncrasies not standard to performing arts centers. For the first time in the Center’s history, loading doors will be installed backstage, facilitating quicker and easier load-ins of scenery and equipment and allowing direct access to backstage for artists and crews (currently all shows load-in through the lobby and front of house). A ten-foot thick raised barrier separating backstage from the stage itself will be removed in its entirety along with choral risers and a small baptismal pool that are original to the facility. These changes, along with creation of additional entrances to the stage, will improve artist access between backstage and front of stage, and reduce wear-and-tear on the front of house.

“It’s a priority for us to give back to the community, and to help make sure all residents – not just those with financial means – have access to wonderful arts and education experiences,” says Margie Mejia, Chairwoman of

Lytton Rancheria, Lytton Band of Pomo Indians. “From music lovers to dance lovers to the thousands of schoolchildren who attend their first ever performance at the Center, this project will increase access to, and enjoyment of those experiences for everyone in this community, and we are proud to be supporting it.”

Significant work will also be done during phase one to increase accessibility for patrons with disabilities and mobility impairments, and to enhance safety systems in the venue. Among the most noticeable changes will be a new entry door and wheelchair ramp leading from the lobby to a raised platform at the back of the theater, which will provide increased ADA seating and allow unobstructed views of the stage. Additionally, ADA seating will be added in multiple locations in the theater, a new assisted listening device (ALD) system will be installed, and four ADA compliant restrooms will be added backstage. New sprinklers and a new fire alarm system will be installed, as will a new LED aisle and step lighting system to better light the way for patrons entering and exiting the theater.

“Overall, phase one of this project is going to result in an enhanced experience for all of our patrons and artists,” says Rick Nowlin, the Center’s Executive Director. “Patrons will find the space to have a warmer feel, will be able to see and hear better, and will find watching a performance to be very comfortable and welcoming. Artists will be able to more easily bring their performances to our venue, facing far fewer technical challenges and obstacles, and allowing us to continue to push our own artistic boundaries.”

Beyond this summer’s improvements, phase two calls for the installation of a lobby elevator and renovation of the second level balcony and restrooms, providing improved balcony access and services to those with mobility impairments for the first time in the Center’s history, as well as creating opportunities for a second level lobby with concessions offerings. Phase three focuses on enlivening and expanding the Center’s outdoor spaces, creation of a sculpture walk between the Center and the new Sutter medical complex, and improving landscaping, access, and flow. The fourth and final phase of the project focuses on deferred maintenance to the nearly 40 year-old facility. This phase will include a new HVAC system and roof for the building, replacing lobby windows and doors, washing and painting the building, and repaving the parking lot.

“Ultimately, with the fruition of the ‘Bridge to the Future’ project, this organization will have greater capacity to meet the growing and changing needs of our region in the years ahead,” says Nowlin. “As an organization founded by the community and guided by the community, these changes are not only exciting and welcome, but are also essential to fulfilling our mission. We are grateful to the funders of this project for their commitment to helping us serve the community through the arts.”

About Wells Fargo Center for the Arts

A 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, Wells Fargo Center for the Arts is home to world-class performances, nationally recognized education programs, contemporary sculpture, and many popular events. The Arts Center is located in the heart of the Sonoma wine country and ranked among California's top performing arts presenters. Together with its resident companies, the Center annually presents more than 100 performances in music, dance, theater, renowned speakers, and comedy; provides education programs serving 30,000 children and adults; and hosts nearly 1,000 community events a year. Owned and operated by the Luther Burbank Memorial Foundation, the Center relies on charitable community donations to achieve its mission – to enrich, educate, and entertain.

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