

Center for Performing Arts Initiative

Progress Report — September 2026

Building on a Strong Foundation. Defining the Path Forward.

The Center for Performing Arts Initiative has reached an important point in its journey.

Over the past year, the Initiative has moved from a broad community vision to a much more clearly defined understanding of the opportunity, the need, the market, and the path forward. Extensive research and community conversations have confirmed something Rochester has understood for decades: our community has a strong appetite for the arts, a growing regional audience, and a significant gap in the facilities needed to bring high-quality performing arts and entertainment to Rochester.

The question now is how best to bring that opportunity to life.

The work ahead is to determine what the Center should be, how it should operate, where it should be located, and how the community can build the partnerships and support necessary to make it happen.

A Need That Has Been Recognized for Decades

The idea of a major performing arts facility in Rochester is not new. Research conducted for the Initiative by Webb Management (a management consulting firm specializing in the development and operation of cultural facilities) has documented approximately 40 years of discussions, planning efforts and studies concerning the need for better performing arts facilities in the community.

In 2025, a group of arts advocates formally organized the Center for Performing Arts Initiative as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The organization established a mission centered on presenting diverse, high-quality artistic, educational and entertainment experiences while showcasing local, regional and national talent.

Since then, the Initiative has engaged community leaders, arts organizations, educators, business leaders and other stakeholders while gathering information about potential audiences, facility needs and community priorities.

That work has now produced a substantial body of evidence.

The Market Is Larger Than Rochester Alone

Webb Management's 2026 market analysis provides particularly encouraging information about the potential audience for a Center.

Rochester's 2026 population is estimated at **125,951**, with double-digit growth projected over the next decade and beyond. More importantly, Webb Management identified a regional market surrounding Rochester, that encompasses approximately **1.03 million people** in 2026.

The market was developed using actual audience and ticket-buyer data from the Rochester Symphony. The resulting geographic area captures approximately 99% of current Rochester Symphony subscribers and 91%–95% of recent ticket buyers.

That is significant: the potential audience for a Center is not limited to Rochester. It is regional.

The demographic profile is also favorable. Approximately 52% of Rochester residents age 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with approximately 37% nationally. Rochester households have a 2026 median income of approximately \$92,525, above the national figure of \$85,893.

Webb Management's analysis also demonstrates a strong propensity for arts participation. Rochester residents are:

- **12% more likely** than the average American to attend live theater;
- **11% more likely** to attend a rock concert or comedy club;
- **8% more likely** to attend classical music or opera; and
- **4% more likely** to attend a dance performance.

The data shows that Rochester residents have a “spending index” of 114 for tickets to theater, operas and concerts, meaning spending in this category is 14% above the national benchmark of 100.

Clearly, the audience exists.

The Facility Gap Is Real

Perhaps the clearest finding from Webb Management’s assessment is the gap between the number of venues Rochester has and the quality and capabilities those venues provide.

The study identified 37 performance venues with capacities of at least 300 seats within the broader market. Only 5 of these are facilities in Rochester are available for public use. All, however, have limitations in functionality, quality, technical capabilities and/or availability.

Webb Management’s analysis found that the availability of quality venues drops significantly once capacity exceeds approximately 800 seats, with the most pronounced gap among presenting venues in the 1,200-to-3,000-seat range.

This is the critical distinction:

Rochester has performance spaces. What Rochester does not have is a purpose-built, high-quality facility capable of consistently supporting major touring productions, symphonic music, Broadway-scale performances and other high-production-value events.

The current facilities each serve important purposes, but they do not collectively fill that gap. Webb Management’s assessment identifies limitations involving acoustics, stage capacity, backstage accommodations, technical systems, loading and audience experience at existing facilities.

The Rochester Symphony, Honors Choirs and Choral Arts Ensemble have identified potential uses for improved facilities, while other arts organizations have identified limitations with current spaces.

The Mission Gap is Real

None of the publicly-available facilities in our region have a mission that includes education as a key goal. None has a mission to preferentially support local and regional performers. None has a mission to be a community-building focus of activity. In the Center for Performing Arts Initiative, arts education, serving local performers, and building community are all principal pillars of our vision.

Rochester Is Asking for More

The need is not limited to the arts community.

The City of Rochester's Vision 2025 Community Insights Report identified arts, culture and creative spaces as part of the community's future priorities. Residents expressed interest in more arts opportunities for youth, cultural programming, an expanded arts center and a flexible performing arts venue.

Experience Rochester's 2026 tourism research reinforces the same message.

Among Rochester residents surveyed, the three most frequently identified goals for non-medical tourism growth were:

- More entertainment — **44.8%**
- More recreational opportunities — **43.4%**
- More attractions — **42.0%**

Residents also identified more entertainment, arts, culture and events among the things Rochester needs to become a more vibrant visitor destination. Local businesses similarly identified cultural attractions as an important potential addition to Rochester's tourism offerings.

These findings align directly with the Initiative's vision for a Center that is more than a theater—a place that contributes to arts, education, entertainment, tourism, community connection and quality of life.

A Broader Economic and Community Opportunity

The case for the Center extends beyond performances.

Webb Management notes that arts and culture contributed \$14.8 billion to Minnesota's economy, supported \$7.7 billion in arts-worker compensation, and employed an estimated 93,918 people.

Rochester's visitor economy presents another opportunity. In 2025, visitors accounted for 11% of local spending on arts, entertainment and attractions, with average visitor spending in that category of approximately \$37 per day.

A Center can therefore be viewed not simply as a destination for performances, but as part of Rochester's broader cultural and economic infrastructure.

The Initiative's vision is that a new facility aspiring to become a "community living room". The Center will be welcoming and serve a mission beyond performance nights, including educational programs, community events, partnerships, special events and opportunities for local artists and organizations.

The Next Critical Step: Building Strong Partnerships

The Initiative's progress now brings it to an important next stage: building strong partnerships with the City of Rochester and Mayo Clinic. A successful Center will need to be more than an arts project. It must be understood as a community asset and strategic partner that can contribute to Rochester's future.

The work conducted to date demonstrates how a Center could contribute to Rochester's broader goals for economic development, tourism, quality of life, education and community vitality. Webb Management

specifically identified potential connections with both the City's development priorities and Mayo Clinic's Destination Medical Center initiative.

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For Mayo Clinic, potential connections identified in the assessment include a high-quality venue for major events, an anchor for an arts and entertainment district, opportunities connecting arts and health, and an amenity that supports the concept of a “destination” medical center and contributes to the recruitment and retention of physicians, researchers and staff.

For the City of Rochester, the opportunity includes strengthening downtown vitality, tourism, and cultural programming, as well as boosting and diversifying the local economy and enriching the community's overall quality of life.

Developing those relationships and identifying the right partnership model is now an essential part of the Initiative's work.

Where We Are Headed

The Initiative has reached an important inflection point, where the information gathered can guide the next stage of planning and partnership-building.

The work completed by Webb Management has strengthened the factual foundation for the project while helping identify the questions that must be answered before a final project can be defined.

The next steps include:

- Defining the appropriate facility and its program requirements;
- Determining the appropriate scale and configuration;
- Developing a sustainable business and operating model;
- Determining the Center's economic and community impact;
- Exploring potential funding sources;
- Building strong partnerships with the City of Rochester and Mayo Clinic;
- Continuing conversations with potential public, institutional and private partners; and
- Identifying the location that best serves the Center, its audiences, artists, partners and donors.

The Initiative is not at the end of the process. It is at the point where the information gathered can guide the next stage of planning and partnership-building.

Rochester is growing. Its residents and businesses are asking for more entertainment, attractions, arts and cultural experiences. Its existing venues serve important purposes but leave a documented gap in high-quality, high-production-value performance space.

Rochester has a demonstrated need, a demonstrated audience and a demonstrated opportunity to create a performing arts resource worthy of the community and the region. For decades, Rochester has discussed the need. Today, the Initiative is doing the work required to turn that long-standing need into a clearly defined opportunity.