



EMILY FREEMAN

Free the Cuthbert

What would it take to bring down the fences?

A gravel walkway rings a towering chain-link fence topped with barbed wire in the middle of Alton Baker Park in Eugene. No, this isn't the site of a new Lane County prison, but it is instead the sometime-called "jewel of Eugene" — the Cuthbert Amphitheater.

The rising temperatures and lack of college students tell us its summer, but the Cuthbert lies quiet behind its locked fences along the Canoe Canal, waiting for its first event — which is not scheduled until July 12. Regional as well as national promoters have long been wary of booking acts at the Cuthbert, a venue which has had its share of silent summers broken only by a few shows, some of which are sparsely attended.

History has proven that Eugene residents don't mind spending a few bucks on a ticket to a show at the Cuthbert. Past acts such as Lyle Lovett and James Taylor have sold out. But promoters are finding out that it doesn't pay to bring acts that aren't "big name" to the Cuthbert. And with the price of renting the facility, as well as paying for the light and sound crews, concessions, security, setup, and cleanup, many promoters are looking at a price they can't afford without a big act guaranteed to sell tickets.

Hankins says one typical commercial

show last summer sold about \$60,000 in tickets to 1,700 people, less than half the capacity of the venue. Cuthbert rental was \$12,000, leaving \$48,000 to pay for performers, marketing, other overhead, and hopefully some profit. Local non-profits pay about half the commercial rental rate.

Brendan Releford, who is in charge of booking for local promoter Big Green, said that the Cuthbert is definitely an asset to the community, but can become a financial washout to the promotions company. "As a promoter it can get a little bit pricey to put shows in there," Releford said. "But the city is really working hard to try and make it accessible, and at some point I really think they'll come up with a good plan for it."

Indeed, plans are in the works for a new and improved Cuthbert. Robb Hankins is cultural services director for the city, overseeing the Hult Center and Cuthbert. Hankins receives his earful of suggestions from citizens concerned about the future of the Cuthbert. One frequent question is, "Why can't the Cuthbert be more like Roseburg or Albany? They have good shows, and they're free!"

Roseburg's free summer concert series relies mainly on local businesses and industries who provide funding for the rental and

running of the facility. But such sponsorship in Eugene is more difficult. Hankins said that the Hult Center and its resident companies already collect money from sponsors to fund such organizations as the Eugene Symphony, Eugene Opera and Bach Festival, so adding other events that need to be funded, such as concerts at the Cuthbert, would put more of a burden on local sponsors than they would be willing to bear.

"For people to try and compare Roseburg and Eugene in terms of sponsorship is a little bit unfair," Hankins said. "Roseburg doesn't have a major performing arts center; it doesn't have a major symphony, opera, ballet, theater or dance company. Those organizations

While the heads of city departments are busy trying to figure out hypothetical costs, and citizens are calling to offer suggestions, Cuthbert still remains silent, underused in its chain-link cell. But Hankins has a plan. For the past four months, Cultural Services employees have been meeting with Eugene Parks and Open Spaces to come up with a better future for the Cuthbert. "In our meetings we put this idea on the table: what if we started thinking of the Cuthbert as truly being a part of Alton Baker Park?" Hankins says. "What if we opened it up year-round as an arts and outdoors facility?"

Hankins said he wants to see the Cuthbert, which is situated near the center of Alton Baker Park, become a part of the community — such as the park around it. Local group presentations, music festivals and educational lectures are some of the possible uses for the Cuthbert that the planners have been tossing around. In an ideal future, Hankins says, the fence will come down and the Cuthbert grounds will be accessible to the community. "People could wander in on the weekends and have a picnic in or around the Cuthbert even if an event wasn't there," Hankins said. "If we would take down all the fences and open the Cuthbert up, it would be a part of Alton Baker Park, and not this fenced-in sort of island."

But even if the Cuthbert were to be freed to the public, there would still be costs. "No matter if James Taylor or a local group comes in," Hankins says, "the only way it will be successful is if enough people want to come and pay some sort of reasonable ticket fee." The ticket fees, however, could be very low if enough support is generated in the community for such events.

Ticket prices this summer range from \$15 to \$38.50. Upcoming concerts at the Cuthbert are The Chieftans July 12, OFAM's Emerald City Jazz Kings Aug. 13, Franklin the Turtle Aug. 19, Trick Pony Sept. 11, Steve Riley &

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here in Eugene are already pulling hundreds of thousands of dollars of sponsorship from the community."

Roseburg also operates its concert venue as a non-union house, so local volunteers are able to provide the light and sound for the shows. Cuthbert is a union-operated house, and despite the professional work done by the union crews, many promoters don't like to see the extra cost added onto their bill.

The Mamou Playboys Sept. 9, and the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra Dance Party Sept. 11 (see <http://hultcenter.org> for details).

As with any major renovation, though, the makeover of the Cuthbert will take time. Meanwhile, all Eugene residents can do is loosen their purse strings and enjoy the few concerts scheduled this summer behind the barbed wire at the Cuthbert. That or drive to Roseburg. **EW**

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