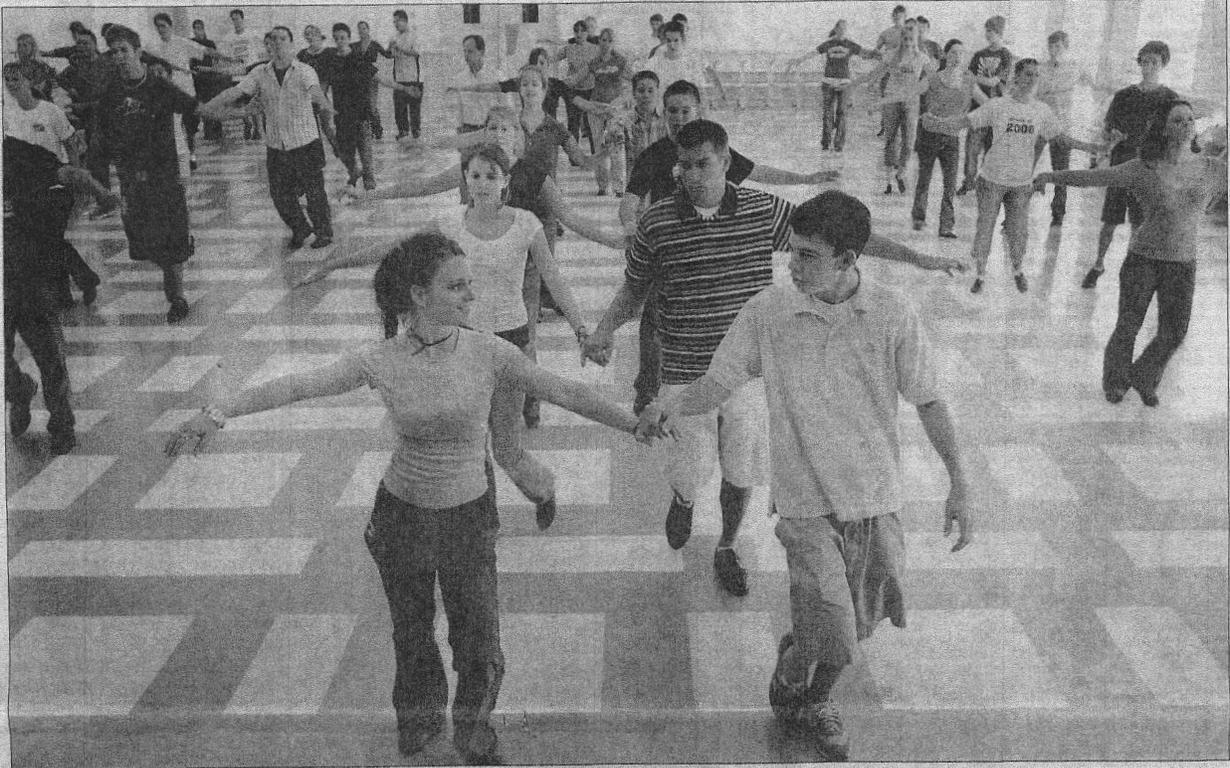


SONOMA COUNTY



Photos by KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

Brina Cimino, center left, a Maria Carrillo High School senior, dances with Kyle Surlow, a Montgomery High School senior, at the Nordquist Dance Club on Saturday at the Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Hall. Dance students from around the county use the building once a week.

Money woes for veterans' halls

Maintenance costs outstrip revenues from users' fees at 8 Sonoma County facilities

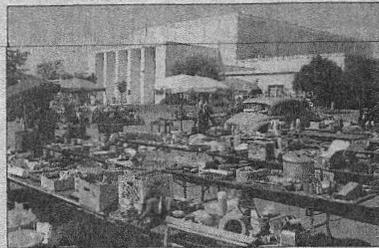
By KERRY BENEFIELD
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

For 35 years, Marilyn Smith has taught Balkan dancing at the Veterans Memorial Hall in Santa Rosa.

The sound system is so bad in the Lodge Room of the 55-year-old structure on Maple Avenue that she usually brings her own stereo and rigs a microphone up to a speaker. But the wood floor is pristine and the staff is efficient and knows her when she calls, she said.

"I love the Vets building," she said.

But with slipping attendance



Above, a flea market takes up most of the parking lot at the Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Hall. At right, Steve Fox, left, of Santa Rosa and David Greenfell of Petaluma talk war game strategy at the Cotati Veterans Hall.



and a perennial revenue shortfall, county officials are concerned about the ability to maintain the county's eight veterans' memorial and community buildings while keeping them affordable for classes, shows and low-

cost parties.

Those who use the facilities say they can't afford to go elsewhere.

Private halls and wineries can charge thousands of dollars an hour. The top rate among veterans' buildings is for the main au-

ditorium in Santa Rosa, which rents for \$86 an hour.

And that's the commercial rate. A noncommercial group can rent that same room for \$66.

"Our main customers are non-

TURN TO HALLS, PAGE B6

"Our main customers are nonprofits . . . If you have buckets of money, you are going to go to one of the fine wineries."

SABRINA SPEAR, Sonoma County public facilities manager

HALLS: County lost \$576,000 in 2003-04

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1

profits who are trying to have an event," said Sabrina Spear, public facilities manager for the county. "If you have buckets of money, you are going to go to one of the fine wineries." But keeping things affordable has its price.

In 2003-04, the county lost more than \$576,000 between the eight buildings as maintenance costs far outpaced revenues collected. At the county's flagship operation in Santa Rosa, revenues in 2003-04 fell more than \$113,000 short of what the county spent to maintain that facility. At the same time, use countywide is down 13 percent from 15 years ago.

Despite a yawning gap between the cost to run the buildings and what the county brings in from users' fees, officials say they are reluctant to boost rates. After years of offering the same price, the county only recently began imposing annual cost-of-living increases.

Anything more than that and the facilities will no longer be affordable, Spear said.

"If we were to raise our prices to pay for what needs to be done, those people who utilize the buildings wouldn't be able to afford it," she said.

Spear likens the community buildings to the library system — a community asset that cannot be expected to fund itself.

"If I were a business, I probably would have shut down

SONOMA COUNTY'S COMMUNITY BUILDINGS

Cloverdale

205 West St.
Built in 1961
Seating capacity: 250
Hourly rental rate: \$41

Cotati

8505 Park Ave.
Built in 1961
Seating capacity: 200
Hourly rental rate: \$41

Guerneville

First and Church streets
Built in 1957
Seating capacity: 250
Hourly rental rate: \$36

Occidental

3920 Bohemian Highway
Built in 1974
Seating capacity: 360
Hourly rental rate: \$36

Petaluma

1094 Petaluma Blvd. S.
Built in 1959
Seating capacity: 870
Hourly rental rate: \$56

Santa Rosa

1351 Maple Ave.
Built in 1950
Seating capacity: 1,000
Hourly rental rate: \$66

Sebastopol

282 High St.
Built in 1958
Seating capacity: 500
Hourly rental rate: \$56

Sonoma

126 First St. W.
Built in 1952
Seating capacity: 500
Hourly rental rate: \$56
(Rates are for noncommercial uses)

years ago," she said.

A report on the physical and financial health of the eight buildings, which has taken more than a year to prepare, is expected to be presented to the Board of Supervisors in January.

"I don't see a situation in which the county would get out of the veterans' building business, which is why it is so important to do an analysis today on how we keep these facilities open into the future," said Supervisor Paul Kelley.

Because the buildings are legally protected as memorials to veterans, the county cannot shut them down without erecting replacement facilities, even if they are determined to be financial drains.

Between 1950 and 1961, seven veterans' memorial buildings were built throughout the county. All of the buildings except the center in Guerneville were built with self-imposed, tempo-

rary property taxes. Their maintenance and operation falls to the county.

The Occidental Community Center, while not a memorial to veterans, was built in 1974 and faces the same mounting maintenance expenses.

Safety is not a concern for any of the buildings, according to Rob Kamback, director of the county's architectural division, who is leading the study.

"We have no qualms about people being in the buildings," he said.

But comfort and the future ability to attract users are issues.

"Right now we have leaks in Santa Rosa," Spear said. "They have buttoned them all up, but we are trying to get a new roof before it starts coming into the interior."

Al Frati, who for years has hosted the Sons of Italy Lodge 1898 dinners in the auditorium in Santa Rosa, said the members love the commercial kitchen. But Frati is hoping the county's long-range plan includes air conditioning, a luxury none of the eight buildings offer.

"The only thing wrong is that in the summertime they have absolutely no air conditioning," Frati said. "You get 600-700 people in there and it's pretty rough with no air."