



# THE WOODRUFF ARTS CENTER

## **By Virginia Hepner, President and Chief Executive Officer, Woodruff Arts Center**

Unintended consequences.

That's the concern that comes to mind when the State of Georgia's proposed gaming legislation is discussed here at the Woodruff Arts Center.

As the Georgia General Assembly debates the merits of allowing resort casinos, proponents promise this bet will pay off and attract more tourism, a billion dollar investment in new infrastructure, job creation and a windfall for college scholarships.

But as Gov. Nathan Deal has noted, casino gambling could also cannibalize the Georgia Lottery revenues that fund the HOPE scholarship and Pre-K programs. In other words, he's warning us to at least consider what we may lose in this bargain – the unintended consequences. And those possible consequences extend to the work we do here at the Arts Center, home to the Alliance Theatre, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO) and the High Museum of Art.

The Georgia Arts and Culture Venues Coalition, which represents 19 members across the state, wants legislators to understand fully how casinos with large entertainment theaters could seriously damage existing, family-friendly destinations that contribute significantly to the quality of life in our state.

I assure you we're not afraid of competition. We compete every day in a market saturated with many businesses and nonprofits that offer top-shelf acts and fun activities.

A casino with an entertainment venue that can seat thousands, however, is

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no ordinary competitor. Rather than facing off on a level playing field, casinos are able to box out existing venues by paying far above market rates for top acts. They use these events as loss leaders to bring in customers – and then make their profits on gambling. Adding to the problem, casinos can demand exclusivity agreements in return for their big payouts, preventing acts from performing shows within a certain radius of the casino.

This reality could mean very negative consequences for many arts and culture organizations. At the Woodruff Arts Center, presenting popular performers in Symphony Hall, both with and without the ASO, has been an essential element in balancing our budgets over the years. This dynamic applies both to privately owned non-profits as well as municipally owned facilities.

The ‘stacked deck’ for the casinos could also impact the ways we enrich the community. For example, we host more than 200,000 students on our campus each year and hundreds of teachers. That makes the Woodruff Arts Center the largest arts educator in Georgia. We would not want to lose the ability to continue that work due to the financial consequences of a non-competitive environment.

The coalition isn’t taking a stand for or against the casino legislation, but it does want to make sure that we have safeguards in place to address the unintended consequences it could create. As currently drafted, the legislation offers no solutions to continue or ensure a level playing field