

## Munro: With parking fee increase and brash new house lights, Saroyan Theatre a disappointment

By Donald  
Munro



Fresno Convention Center's William Saroyan Theatre. Photographed on Friday, January 31, 2014 in Fresno, Calif.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — Fresno Bee Staff Photo [Buy Photo](#)

I got really grouchy at the Fresno Philharmonic's last concert a couple of weeks ago at the Saroyan Theatre.

Not because of the orchestra, which played a scintillating program of Latin music that had me almost woozy (in a good way) from the infectious rhythms exploding from the stage.

There were two big things that irked me:

- A more than 40% increase in the price to park in the [Fresno Convention Center](#) garage. (A brazenly unprofessional looking, hand-lettered sign announced the increase, from \$7 to \$10, although seniors still get half off.) It's now more expensive to park for a [Fresno Philharmonic](#) concert at the Saroyan than it is to park for the Los Angeles Philharmonic at Disney Concert Hall, which charges \$9.
- And another encounter with the theater's new house lights, which I first experienced back in November. The new lights, which illuminate the "house," or where the audience sits, before and after a performance, gave the place the ambiance of a high school gymnasium. The cold, bluish lights were so harsh and amateurish that I felt as if I were in

a bar that was ready to close, revealing sticky floors for the cleaning staff.

Before I go any further, let me reiterate something: the Saroyan isn't a private facility. The theater belongs to me. And you. Often we speak of such public facilities as belonging to the "city of Fresno," as if it's some distant entity, or managed by SMG, the company that runs daily operations. But we all have a stake in the Saroyan, just as we do in city parks and other public amenities, because they represent a choice: We choose to invest and maintain such places because they contribute to our quality of life.

With that in mind, and in an attempt to quench my grouchiness, I tried to find some answers.

### **Parking increase**

Here's the short version of how it happened: The increase in parking fees was approved by the City Council, says Mark Standriff, communications director for the city. It went into effect on Jan. 1, at the same time newcomer S&P Parking took over the city parking contract from ACE Parking, which lost its bid to continue.

The reason: "The Convention Center is losing a lot of money," says Fresno City Council Member Lee Brand. "We have to be more cost-conscious and run it like a business."

At the same time, Brand acknowledges that convention centers across the country are subsidized — and many have to deal with the issue of aging facilities, just like in Fresno.

Brand used his authority as chairman of the council's three-member audit and finance committee to spend considerable time digging into the finances of the center, which includes the Saroyan Theatre, Selland Arena and Valdez Hall. (My colleague, City Hall reporter George Hostetter, noted last year that Brand "spent much of 2013 in a mini-war with Convention Center officials.")

The city has been subsidizing the Convention Center to the tune of about \$7.2 million a year in the most recent budget. (About \$5.5 million in fiscal year 2014 is to service bond debt.) Brand says progress has been made in reducing the remaining annual subsidy, which he estimates is now less than \$1 million.

Money at the Convention Center is tight, says Claudia Arguelles, marketing director. She says that the center has 17 full-time staff as opposed to 50-full time staff 10 years ago, and that benefits and pay have been cut for those that remain.

She notes that the \$10 fee to park now matches what it costs to park at Save Mart Center. And she says that with the increase in parking fees, a new arrangement means that money will go directly to the center for operational expenses — a change from before, when parking fees went into the city's general fund.

But Brand says that's not an important distinction. Whether parking money was going into the general fund before doesn't really matter, he says — the city still subsidizes the Convention Center.

My take: I can understand the argument for increasing parking fees in the light of city finances. But you also have to weigh what this could do in terms of discouraging people to come downtown for cultural events. (The Shaghoian Hall at the Clovis North Educational Center, where the Fresno Philharmonic also plays, doesn't charge anything for parking.) There is a tipping point for some folks, and this might be it.

Also, there are cheaper lots other than the garage around the Saroyan, and lots of street parking on Sunday afternoons if you're willing to walk, and the garage might actually end up taking in less money than before if enough people simply decide not to park there.

But here's my main objection: If you're going to pay three bucks more to park in the garage, at the very least what you should expect is better security. After Fresno Philharmonic music director Theodore Kuchar went public in September that his car was broken into and items stolen while he was conducting a performance, other orchestra members

stepped forward with similar stories.

I wasn't able to pin down whether there will be any additional security with the increased fees, however — everyone I talked to seems to think it would be a good idea, but no one will actually confirm it.

If you have to pay \$10 to park and you still can't expect someone to stick around to watch the cars, that would be troubling.

## House lights

I have a stronger opinion about the new house lights at the Saroyan, which were installed a couple of months ago as part of an energy-efficiency upgrade at the Convention Center.

So does Joel C. Abels, artistic director of StageWorks Fresno, who went to see a national tour of "Camelot" in January.

"What we experienced was horrific," he says. "I have never been in a union house (a large and professional venue such as the Saroyan) and experienced that. The only time I have was seeing the circus."

Christopher Boltz, the lighting and scenic designer at Fresno City College, hasn't yet seen the new house lights, but he offers a general view of what they should accomplish.

"A house lighting system should provide comfortable lighting for the audience to read the program, and find their seats," he says. "The house lights also should provide a gentle transition from preshow/intermission into the performance. It also brings the audience back to the real world at the conclusion of the show."

House lights aren't just utilitarian, in other words. They're an integral part of a theater's lighting design. They create a mood. That's part of the magic of the theater. Can you imagine going to the Curran Theatre in San Francisco, say, or the Ahmanson in Los Angeles, and having your evening start with gymnasium lighting?

Here's the back story: About \$950,000 was spent to make lighting more energy-efficient throughout the Convention Center, Arguelles says. The goal was to cut down on the center's hefty PG&E bill, which was running about \$1 million a year.

Brand says that the new lighting will pay for itself in reduced energy bills in just two years.

A company called [Efficiency Energy](#), based in Denver, did the work. "The result is energy savings, maintenance savings, better controls and a higher quality, more uniformed light output," Efficiency Energy's Trey Littell wrote in an email.

Another advantage: Instead of burning out after a year or two, the new bulbs are warranted for 10 years and could last for 30, Littell says.

The company has more than eight years of experience putting together energy-efficient lighting designs, including the Bellco Theatre at the Colorado Convention Center.

Before and after pictures provided by the company show parts of the Fresno Convention Center in darkness before the revamp, and afterward a much brighter and more even light. But those "before" pics are of a poorly maintained lighting system, Boltz says.

"In almost all of the 'before' pictures there are burned-out fixtures, fixtures lamped with a non-matching lamp color-wise, and some of them (seeing the bad spread of light) lamped with an incorrect lamp so that it does not spread properly," he says.

The "after" pictures seem to be improvements when it comes to overall coverage, but, Boltz says, "I would love to

compare them with how the original systems looked when first installed.”

My guess: Some Saroyan patrons complained about the house lighting being too dark (which is no wonder with all those burned-out bulbs), and the new system was designed to be as even and bright as possible, forgetting that it also had to be theatrical.

Randy Garabedian, who works at [Michael Garrison Associates](#), a Fresno theatrical consulting company, and also as a stagehand at the Fresno Convention Center, has a lot of history with the Saroyan. He re-engineered the lighting system 10 years ago. He thinks that the wrong color temperature was used for the new house lights.

A colder color temperature casts a more bluish light as perceived by the eyes, he says.

I'm no lighting designer, but that matches my perception: The lights seem harsh and sterile, far from the warmth that's needed for a theatrical mood.

Never fear, says the Convention Center. The lights are supposed to have dimmers. The ones that were installed in December were defective and are being replaced. Once new dimmers work, the house lights won't seem as brash, according to the folks at Efficiency Energy.

But I'm skeptical, and so are such folks as Abels, who has worked with dimmable LED lights before and seen their limitations. I hope if the dimmers don't do the job something else can be done.

### **The takeaway**

For some people, I'm sure that my attention on parking and house lights seems nitpicky. But I think both are part of a larger picture: What sort of priority should we put on the Saroyan Theatre as the flagship of culture in the community? We don't expect parks to pay for themselves. (If that were the case, Woodward Park would long ago have been auctioned off to the highest developer bidder.) Why should we expect something different when it comes to the arts?

Parking and house lights might seem like minor irritations, but small things can add up.

At least I can sigh in relief, a little, at what Brand has to say about the overall future of the Saroyan. Some people have pitched simply shutting down Saroyan because it's running a deficit, “but that is not an option,” he says.

Too often, I think, the Saroyan gets lumped in with the rest of the Convention Center in terms of fiscal issues. Yes, conventions are important and stimulate the economy. But the Saroyan is in many ways something apart, with unique needs and benefits. I've heard some noises about breaking the Saroyan apart from the rest of the center and putting it under the purview of a non-profit organization. That's the model for many such theaters across the country.

We need to figure out a way to keep this resource in top working order — and as world-class as we can make it.

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