

## Vineland's Landis Theater will be arts center hub

May 11, 2016 by **Melanie Burney**, Staff Writer



Built during the Depression to make a grand statement, the historic Landis Theater is again at the centerpiece of a plan to rebuild downtown Vineland, N.J.

Under a partnership announced Tuesday, the Landis will be the new Cumberland County base for the Bay Atlantic Symphony. Beginning with the 2016-17 season, the orchestra will bring its subscription concert series to the landmark theater.

"We think we will bring in some of the most beautiful music in the world," said Paul Herron, executive director of the Bay Atlantic Symphony. "We're really excited to be performing at the Landis Theater."

In addition to a five-concert classical music series that will launch in the fall, the symphony plans to develop an educational outreach program in Vineland public schools for middle and high school students.

"This is how we can help develop an arts community," Herron said. "We see ourselves not just as an arts organization but also a service organization."

The symphony has served a range of audiences for three decades, even though it has no performance home base. The 60-piece orchestra is made up of a cadre of musicians hired from across the region.

Herron said the theater will undergo some minor changes to improve the acoustics. An Oct. 29 grand opening will feature Mozart's *Requiem* with four opera soloists and 100 singers from the area, he said.

The Landis, reopened in 2010 after a \$14 million refurbishment, is the center of a plan to revitalize Landis Avenue, the Main Street of Vineland.

The latest effort seeks to reinvent the once-bustling avenue using the theater as an anchor to draw visitors downtown, said Russell J. Swanson, executive director of the Vineland Downtown Improvement District.

Besides the symphony, the Landis will be used for movies and live shows year-round that will aim to appeal to everyone - from baby boomers to Generation Xers and millennials, he said.

"It's the rebirth of the theater," Swanson said. "It is a tremendous springboard opportunity."

Swanson said the city hopes to lure out-of-town crowds to Landis Avenue, known for its collection of early 20th century storefronts and office buildings. A new restaurant is expected to open this summer next to the Landis. Planners hope theatergoers will patronize local restaurants and businesses.

The Landis was built in 1937 by native son Eugene Mori, who later built Garden State Park and the Cherry Hill Inn, and who owned the land where Cherry Hill Mall sits.

An art deco-style theater, the Landis had vaudeville acts, including Abbott and Costello. The 1,200-seat movie palace was often packed for decades.

Herron said the symphony would help give the Landis a "cultural presence in the heart of Vineland." The symphony has long operated in the most rural and economically distressed parts of the state like Vineland.

"We're excited about bringing our music to a lot more people," Herron said. "It will be an extraordinary experience for our musicians and our audience."

The Bay Atlantic has residencies at colleges, towns, and festivals, and at the Borgata in Atlantic City. The symphony is moving its performances from Cumberland County College to the Landis.