



Photos by JENNIFER PASSARO/Press

The Music Conservatory of Sandpoint's director and co-founder Karin Wedemeyer stands with Julienne Dance and Brittany Ratelle in front of the Romer house on Government Way. Dance and Ratelle envision opening a music conservatory in the historic house.

# Romer building's predicament could be music to many ears

By JENNIFER PASSARO  
Staff Writer

A music conservatory could open its doors in Coeur d'Alene this year.

Julienne Dance, along with local attorney Brittany Ratelle, wants to found a music conservatory in Coeur d'Alene.

Dance's dream location for this project?

The contested, county-owned Romer house at 627 Government Way.

Kootenai County purchased the historic

home in the fall of 2017 with plans to demolish it and build an additional county office building to help with overcrowding in its current buildings. Nearby neighbors formed the Government Way Historic Neighborhood Coalition and have been fighting to preserve the house.

Dance now needs their support and the backing of the community to make her dream a reality.

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Kootenai County owns the Romer house on Government Way. Commissioners will consider leasing the building to a budding music conservatory, if the conservatory agrees to fund renovations.

## “This city needs, in my opinion, a high level music institute or conservatory.”

JAN PELLANT, Coeur d'Alene Symphony conductor

### MUSIC

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“We need an incubator to develop the talent we have in this community,” she said.

Dance believes magic exists in music schools.

“The other day I was driving down Government Way and it hit me: They don't have a purpose for this building. Let's make it a music conservatory,” she said.

As a child, the piano teacher, previous Coeur d'Alene Symphony board member, and Mountain Lake Music Festival organizer used to lay beneath the complex underside of the family piano and listen to her dad play his saxophone. Music is and has been an integral part of Dance's life. She wants to facilitate that passion in other people.

“My whole life I have had my hand in music,” she said.

Dance, Ratelle, and the Music Conservatory of Sandpoint's Director and co-founder Karin Wedemeyer presented the proposal to the Kootenai County Board of Commissioners and the county's independent contractor for Buildings & Grounds, Shawn Riley, Wednesday morning.

“We find that a project like this actually draws capital in, in a pretty significant way,” Wedemeyer said. “This is really an extraordinary opportunity to create something that involves the community in a very positive way.”

Wedemeyer then shared the journey of the Music Conservatory of Sandpoint with the commissioners.

“Our journey is really an important element in your understanding of what this is about,” Wedemeyer said. “Our school is now 10 years old. It is sort of a garage story. We started with eight students and two instructors in the back of a dance studio. We are now teaching 400 students and I want you to just pause at that number for a second because the Sandpoint community is only 8,600 inhabitants.”

The conservatory

serves the greater Sandpoint area and is fully accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. It supports a full administrative staff and 19 music instructors through earned income, fundraising events, donors, and grants.

“But it's not how we started,” Wedemeyer said. “I think it's really important to embrace a process to grow something of significance. There is a process involved and it's not an overnight process.”

The commissioners voiced their support for Dance's effort. They envision leasing the Romer building to the conservatory for a nominal rate if the conservatory agrees to fund the necessary renovations.

“When you have an older building that has the tradition of what has happened before, you bring the quality of something that has come through time into a music conservatory,” Dance said.

The building's 1,300-square-foot basement is unusable. Electrical work, mold mitigation, connections to the water system, and updates to the sewer system need to be completed. The building needs a new roof and to be brought into compliance with ADA.

“Our estimate two years ago was several hundred thousand dollars to renovate and bring the building up to code,” Riley said. “These are the facts of the building. Everything has to come up to code.”

“And even having said all of this, which might sound monumental, I can tell you the last thing the city wants to see is for this building to get demolished,” commissioner Chris Fillios said. “Whatever needs to be done, I think we can safely say that you are going to get a tremendous amount of support from the city. However, there are things that cannot be compromised.”

The music conservatory, like its Sandpoint neighbor, would offer early childhood classes and

early music exploration. It could provide space for string ensemble and orchestral programs in addition to special programs including handicapped music exploration and senior choir. Master classes, recitals, and children's choir concerts would center the community to celebrate music.

“There is no end to what we can do,” Dance said. “I'd love to see a children's choir come out of there.”

“It is exciting to see individuals who are passionate move to offer services and programs to the greater community,” Coeur d'Alene City Councilwoman Amy Evans said. “I'm excited to hear of Dance's effort to bring a music conservatory to Coeur d'Alene and further the music culture and art culture in our community.”

“It took years for the community to trust us,” Wedemeyer said. “To understand that we are an institute of integrity, we mean quality and business. Slowly and surely we grew.”

The conversation brimmed with enthusiasm and excitement for the future ahead. Wedemeyer suggested the conservatory, in close proximity to downtown, would bring hundreds of people to the downtown core, especially in the shoulder seasons when business is slow in the resort community.

“We started this school the day after the financial collapse and who would have ever thought, right?” Wedemeyer said of the Sandpoint conservatory. “Yet there was a void and a need so big that no matter what happened around us we grew from 8 to 400 students.”

Dance, Ratelle and the commissioners plan to meet again in early March, hopefully with the city, to discuss the conservatory's progress.

“This city needs, in my opinion, a high level music institute or conservatory,” Coeur d'Alene Symphony conductor and music community leader Jan Pellant said. “I'm glad that this is starting to be a real thing.”