

Is Hartford the next Lake Wobegon?

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Humorist Garrison Keillor may not have been serious when he mentioned he's interested in New England as a permanent base for his renowned radio show.

"It's an idea, not a plan," says his producer, Chris Tschida.

But that hasn't stopped Hartford and several other cities from trying to encourage such a move. From the Governor's office to owners of a dilapidated West End theater, Hartford leaders are abuzz about how to attract the celebrity.

"I think that everyone who I've talked with is very earnest about providing evidence to Garrison that — should he consider a move out of Manhattan — that Hartford is the place to come," said John Boyer, director of the Mark Twain Memorial.

But before Hartford boosters start setting up the sound stage and selling tickets, there are people elsewhere who would have Keillor believe that their place is ideal for the "American Radio Company" show.

The main competition seems to be Vermont.



■ Keillor

"Everybody's trying to get him," said Jacquie Walker, president of the River Valley Performing Arts Center, in Putney, Vt., near Brattleboro.

"We had thought about this before. We've got good views, excellent acoustics," Walker said of the 400-seat theater that has staged a variety of performances from such artists as violinist Issac Stern to country musician Lyle Lovett.

Walker has written a letter to Keillor inviting him to come. In addition, a local development group is assembling a packet of information to send Keillor, a storyteller, writer and humorist in the tradition of Mark Twain and Will Rogers.

Farther north from River Valley is the Flynn Theatre for the Performing Arts, in Burlington, Vt., which also has made a pitch.

Keillor's show will be there on three consecutive Saturdays starting Dec. 14, and all are reportedly sold out.

"We think he likes the idea of Vermont," said Laura Ludwig, program assistant at the Flynn, which is the home of the Vermont Symphony Orchestra.

"There are a lot of parallels between Vermont and Lake Wobegon," Keillor's fictional town in Minnesota, Ludwig said.

Some theatre officials are not willing to share particulars of why their venue would be ideal for Keillor.

"I don't wish to discuss it," said Norma Sanderson, of Mechanics

Hall, in Worcester, Mass. However, the local chamber of commerce did confirm that a letter and a information packet has been sent to Keillor.

In Hartford, former City Councilman George Ritter recently wrote to Joseph McGee, state economic development commissioner, about Keillor's interest in relocating to the region and the possibility of using the Colonial Theater on Farmington Avenue.

"I think we'll be pulling a group together to try to bring him to the city," said Richard Suisman, one of Ritter's partners in Colonial and also a former city councilman.

It wasn't the only letter McGee received. State Rep. Gary LeBeau, D-East Hartford, sent a letter to the governor's office telling him about Keillor's remark and urging fast action.

Besides the Mark Twain Memorial, where Keillor staged a performance last December that will be released on a double-cassette tape in February, the Old State House, the Downtown Council and lots of others city leaders are figuring ways to get Keillor here.

"Even if he wasn't serious, he may be serious now," said Kathy Butler of the Downtown Council. "We're ready to roll out the red carpet for him."

Boyer said even if all this energy turns out to be a drill, at least Hartford can learn from this experience and apply it to a future opportunity or problem.