

Chandler and Noyes Saved; Harley Clarke Expected to Be Sold - Evanston RoundTable

Chandler-Newberger Center, 1028 Central St.



The Harley Clarke mansion, which houses the Evanston Art Center.

By Shawn Jones

A special order of business on the Council agenda filled chambers to overflow level Monday night, July 11, as City Council members discussed the possibility of "alternative uses" and "alternative provision of services" for three City-owned buildings.

The "alternatives," in each instance, included the sale of property to third parties. The result: the Chandler-Newberger recreation center is safe; discussions will continue regarding the Noyes Cultural Arts Center but will include more players going forward; and the City will actively explore selling the Harley Clarke mansion, 2603 Sheridan Road, home of the Evanston Arts Center.

With 50 speakers signed up to address Council during citizen comment, it took some time before the debate began in earnest despite the fact that Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl allowed each speaker but 45 seconds. The majority of speakers were affiliated with Families for Chandler-Newberger and spoke on behalf of the recreation center. Noyes Cultural Arts Center had its share of supporters as well, leaving the Harley Clarke mansion that houses the Evanston Arts Center without any friends.

Chandler-Newberger Center

When City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz asked rhetorically at a Seventh Ward meeting in June whether the City should be in the recreation business, he may not have expected such an affirmative and resounding "yes" from the community. Speaker after speaker delivered that very message, citing troubled youth, family-friendly activities, combating obesity, winter indoor activities, and fostering community, among other reasons.

Included in the crowd were about a dozen members of a women's senior basketball league formed at Chandler. Such community opportunities are simply not available without a facility such as Chandler,

said Terese McGuire, speaking for the league.

Standing alone among the speakers was a representative from the Salvation Army, Paula Haynes. "The Salvation Army is very interested in acquiring the Chandler-Newberger property," she said, saying her organization could continue to provide the same and perhaps expanded services. Audience members booed and shouted, "No, thanks."

Meredith Reeves it was "unacceptable" that selling Chandler-Newberger was even under discussion. "These people should not be taking time away from their families" to come here and protest, she said.

When the smoke had cleared, it was immediately apparent that there was no support on the Council for "alternative uses" for Chandler-Newberger, or even for "alternative provision of services."

"I believe Chandler-Newberger should be removed from the list," said Mayor Tisdahl. Coming as close as she has ever come to delivering even the threat of a veto, she added, "I cannot ever imagine that I would be able to sign off on closing Chandler-Newberger."

Mr. Bobkiewicz acknowledged the will of the citizens appearing before Council but defended the decision to bring the matter before Council. "The more options on the table, the better your discussions," he said.

The City has already cut \$13.5 million from the budget over the past several years, he said, but needs to slice an additional \$3.5 million in 2012. Although the projections show only a \$1.5 million shortfall in the operating budget, Mr. Bobkiewicz says he would like an additional \$2 million there to use for capital expenditures, rather than issuing bonds.

The City owns a significant amount of real property, and the consideration of Chandler-Newberger, Noyes and the Clarke mansion represents only a first step in the process of examining the best uses of City-owned property, he said.

The only real issue for Council to decide was whether to create a citizen committee to address Chandler issues. Otherwise, everyone might be right back in Council chambers next year arguing the same issue, said Alderman Ann Rainey, 8th Ward. Some aldermen disagreed, however, with Fourth Ward Alderman Don Wilson finding support for his assertion that residents should not have to take time on committees doing things the City should be doing.

Ald. Wilson's motion to remove Chandler-Newberger from the list of properties to consider selling or otherwise changing the use of passed 9-0.

Noyes Cultural Arts Center

A number of speakers expressed support for the City's continued ownership of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, but the issue presented several complicating factors. First, four Noyes tenants have expressed interest in jointly purchasing the building. Second, the building needs significant capital improvements

the City simply cannot afford. Third, several tenants said that they feel shut out of the decision-making process.

Mayor Tisdahl distinguished the discussions about Noyes from the Chandler discussions because, she said, she had been warning tenants for years that the City might have to close Noyes and the Clarke mansion, while Chandler just entered the conversation within the last several weeks. The City cannot afford continued upkeep, she said.

The Piven Theatre Workshop, Next Theatre Company, Evanston Art Center and **Actors Gymnasium** sent the City a letter dated June 1, 2011, expressing interest in purchasing the building. Mayor Tisdahl said that she met with the four and several other tenants to discuss the possibility. "They can't raise money to improve the theater if they don't own the building or at least have a very long-term lease," she said.

A separate group of tenants said they felt excluded from the Mayor's meeting. Ald. Rainey called the offer from the four tenants "wonderful, but I don't think it's inclusive enough." She proposed a motion instructing the City to continue discussion with the four, but to also include all other current tenants in the building. The motion passed 9-0, meaning that there remains a very real chance that Noyes will be sold but that a room full of artists will be involved in all negotiations leading to such a possible sale.

Harley Clarke Mansion

According to a memo from Mr. Bobkiewicz to City Council, the City bought the Harley Clark mansion from a national fraternity in the early 60s. The City leases the mansion to the Evanston Arts Center under a lease that requires the City to maintain the building's exterior. The lease runs through 2021, but the City says it cannot afford to make necessary repairs. "Current deferred capital projects for the building exceed \$400,000," according to the memo.

The Evanston Arts Center is willing to "examine its current lease," says the memo, and perhaps to move elsewhere in the City, said Mayor Tisdahl.

No one spoke up for the mansion during Citizen Comment. Ald. Wilson moved that Council instruct the City to continue efforts to sell the building.

At issue is exactly how much of the property surrounding the building would be sold. "Not one blade of grass," said the Mayor, but the issue is far from resolution. The City owns a swatch of land adjacent to the mansion and a portion of Lighthouse beach.

Insufficient parking limits the possible uses for the property, said Mr. Bobkiewicz, meaning that a restaurant may not be possible. He referenced lodging as one possible use.

Council ultimately voted 9-0 to continue trying to sell the building. The Mayor said that she had shown

the building to a potential buyer recently. Perhaps an offer is soon to follow.

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