

## Panel backs cultural arts, Piven project

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The nationally recognized Piven Theatre Workshop would play a leading role in the revitalization of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, occupying renovated space and a state-of-the-art theater in the building under a plan that received backing Monday from a city committee.

Members of the City Council's Human Services Committee signaled approval of City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz's continuing negotiations with the theater company.

With past efforts to change things at the city owned building "not going as smoothly, as easily as we wanted," the new plan seems to heading the city in the right direction, said Alderman Judy Fiske, in whose 1st Ward the building is located.

Under the plan, Piven would consolidate its existing space — currently spread throughout the building — to one area on all floors of the building at 927 Noyes St., Bobkiewicz said in a memo to the committee.

Piven Theatre officials are proposing to occupy the southern one-third of the building and would extensively renovate the area with new

classrooms, rehearsal space, offices and a new theater, he said.

### Long-term lease

Under the discussions, Piven would seek a long-term lease to the space; in exchange it would invest in excess of \$2.5 million in capital improvements to the theater, he said.

The theatre, founded by Byrne and Joyce Piven, enjoys a national reputation, serving as a training ground for artists and directors, including John and Joan Cusack, and Wilmette native and playwright Sarah Ruhl. The workshop now trains roughly 1,000 students from age 9 to adult.

Right now, Piven employs between 25 to 30 artists and teachers, said Leslie Brown, the group's executive director.

"We have teachers, actors, artists that work with us on a regular basis, and our office is 200 square feet," she said.

She said Piven officials proposed the plan "in terms of making this a workable business" and with the hope of creating long-term sustainability in the building.

"I think this can be a great thing for the city, for the Noyes business district," Brown said Tuesday, "and it provides an opportunity for this build-

ing to be far more utilized, far more dynamic."

### Considered moving

She confirmed that the theater company, with 40-year roots in Evanston, was looking at moving out of Noyes, and possibly even into Chicago last year, because of questions about the building.

The building, which leases space at below-market rates to artists, faces substantial repairs, including a new roof and heating and air conditioning system.

City officials have looked at a new model for operating the center, a former school building, including asking tenants to take a greater role in the building's upkeep.

Because of the ambiguity, Piven officials told Bobkiewicz last fall they were likely moving out of the building, and possibly out of Evanston, Brown confirmed.

In that regard, Piven would be following the trail of some other highly regarded theater groups, such as Northlight Theater and Light Opera Works, which have left the city.

The city manager "said No," to the group's plan to move, Brown recalled. "He demanded a proposal for us to remain in the building," she

recalled, saying, "it's very important to me and the mayor and the city of Evanston that Piven stay."

He asked for a proposal from the group outlining "what you need in order to make it worthwhile to stay," Brown said.

### Whatever it takes

Asked about the situation, Bobkiewicz said his intent was to do everything to retain Piven.

"One of Evanston's great strengths is the local arts," said Bobkiewicz, in the city manager job a little over two years. "I think as a city we have not done a great job in nurturing and supporting those local organizations."

Both the city manager and Brown stressed that Piven is only one piece of the puzzle.

At Noyes, other tenants besides Piven have come together under the leadership of orchestra leader Ken Arlen to propose a collective approach of self governance for the center, Bobkiewicz said in his report to the committee.

"Under this model, there would be greater flexibility for the tenants to occupy and use space at the center," he said. "In return, rents and other revenues at the center



Piven Theatre Workshop student Dakota Bettis (right) and classmates focus in a class at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St. The Theatre Workshop may have a renovated home and state-of-the-art theater under a proposal that members of a city committee backed on Monday. The Piven also offers story theater, improvisation and acting classes for area youngsters. | PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS ZOURBIS

could be reinvested in the center (along with general fund raising) to address capital and maintenance needs."

At the meeting, Bobkiewicz informed committee members that talks also are moving forward on the Harley Clarke Mansion, 2603 Sheridan Road, where the Evanston Arts Center is currently located.

Evanston Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl spoke to Arts Center representatives last year about the city's concerns about the condition of the building and Evanston's in-

ability to make needed capital improvements.

Evanston Arts Center officials share city concerns about the building and are working with the city for relocation of the center's programs to a new location in Evanston, Bobkiewicz told committee members.

At the same time, he sought backing from the committee to obtain a property appraisal of the mansion with proposed subdivisions of the property, "to allow public access to the lakefront and other public uses in the area."