

Debate rages over Piven's plan to fix up Noyes Center

May 31, 2013|Chris Jones | Theater critic

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If you were to inventory the cultural assets of Evanston, you'd start with Northwestern [University](#) and then, very quickly, would get to the Piven Theatre Workshop. There is the famous, and famously complex, Piven family itself: Joyce Piven, now 83, and the late Byrne Piven, who for decades taught North Shore teenagers, including their own children Jeremy (the star of HBO's "Entourage" and "Mr.

Selfridge" on PBS) and Shira (an actress turned Hollywood director who is married to Adam McKay, the movie director and co-founder of "Funny or Die"). There are the illustrious movie-star alumni: John and Joan Cusack, Aidan Quinn, Lili Taylor. And then there are the many former Piven students who are lawyers or businesspeople by profession, but who spent their formative years learning to speak, emote and self-actualize in a Piven class and who now are resource-rich and powerful and who remain profoundly grateful for their education.

Evanston is not over-burdened with such nationally famous institutions, which made the spectacle early this month at the Evanston City Council's Human [Services](#) Committee meeting all the more bizarre. There were artists testifying against other artists; artists arguing that other artists should not get a sweetheart deal from the city; and Evanstonians furiously angry with the Piven Theatre Workshop and doing everything in their power to stop its scheme.

At that May 6 meeting, more than 50 individuals, the record shows, took to the microphone to urge the committee to reject a Piven proposal that would see the theater company greatly increase its footprint at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, a city-owned building at 927 Noyes St. that everyone agrees is falling apart, without funds available for repair. The Piven Theatre has said it wants to save the center through a complicated deal involving Piven fundraising and investments in the building in exchange for years of rent forgiveness (it currently pays more than \$60,000 per year) and a construction loan of \$2.2 million from Evanston. At the end of the build-out project, estimated by Piven to cost a little more than \$3 million, Piven would have new offices, classrooms and a state-of-the-art, [flexible](#) theater not so different, really, from the Lookingglass Theatre in the Water Tower Water Works on Michigan Avenue. The Piven fracas — which has played out in public and been reported in exhaustive detail by such local news operations as the Evanston

Roundtable and Evanston Now — has many different components.

To some people, it's a matter of a small acting school over-promising and over-reaching — empire building, really — at the expense of other artists and arts groups in the building, and putting a cash-strapped city on the hook. To others, it's a tale of a historic, well-polished city gem, and potential economic engine, failing to get a level of public support that it not only richly deserves but that is absurdly modest compared with the sweetheart deals that have been offered to numerous, less illustrious groups in Chicago. But it's also, clearly, a cautionary tale of the struggles many suburban arts groups face in communities that not only lack funding for the arts but don't have much of a plan to finance the care of the city-owned cultural facilities that do exist. In the case of Evanston, there have been plans and grants and focus groups on cultural development aplenty, but the result has generally been the same: [Great ideas](#), folks, but who is going to pay for that? Not the city, that's for sure. There's no money.

The Noyes debacle offers another cautionary tale.

Some opposition to any new public building is de rigueur, but most major arts projects — say, the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago — tend to be new construction. Few can object to the filling of an empty lot with artistic worthiness. If it's not new construction, then such projects tend to be redevelopment and expansion of a building or footprint already owned or controlled by the arts group. That was the situation at the Art Institute of Chicago, for example, and is the current situation at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, now in the midst of an expansion campaign. That's also roughly the deal for Writers' Theatre, which wants to build a new theater on its current plot in Glencoe. But the Noyes Center, built as an elementary school by Daniel Burnham in 1892, is already full. The other tenants are a motley but articulate and organized crew of creative types, some for-profit, some nonprofit, including everyone from teachers to visual artists to puppet creators to musicians and movement specialists. Evanston's plan, therefore, has been seen by some as a zero-sum game: one arts group profiting at the expense of another. Many at Noyes think it inevitable that their own modest rents will be jacked up to pay for the Piven arrangement. Distrust is pervasive.

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