

## Piven Expansion Plan Draws Passionate Opposition, Support

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Dozens of people spoke about a proposed \$3.5 million expansion of Piven Theatre Workshop at the city-owned Noyes Cultural Art Center Monday.

Some 50 people signed up to speak at a city meeting Monday night, passionately advocating their support or opposition to plans for a \$3.5 million expansion of [Piven Theatre Workshop](#) at the city-owned Noyes Cultural Arts Center.

Community members and other tenants at Noyes questioned the finances of the expansion and the physical space required, while Piven supporters said the project would help catalyze revitalization not just of the building but of business on Noyes Street as well. After listening to more than an hour of citizen comments, committee members voted to hold the matter in committee and prepared a list of questions they would like to see answered by Piven before coming to a decision on the proposal.

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“How does this agreement make the Noyes Center more self-sustaining as a city facility?” said Ald. Jane Grover (7th Ward). “We need to understand the dimensions of this project.”

Under the proposal considered Monday, Piven’s rent would drop to the nominal fee of \$1 per year beginning in 2014, and the city would grant the theater education program a \$2.2 million, 30-year loan from the city to help fund renovations to the building and an expansion, including a new theater space. Piven would pay for the rest of the work through fundraising or private bank financing.

Plans call for Piven to take over roughly half of the 100-year-old building—including some of the space currently occupied by other tenants. In mid-April, city manager Wally Bobkiewicz notified the Evanston Children’s Choir and one other tenant that they would have to move out, based on the fact that they had been tenants in the building for the least amount of time. But Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl soon requested that Bobkiewicz come up with new criteria for deciding which tenants could stay or go. Those criteria are still under

development, according to city documents.

Evanston Children's Choir director and founder Gary Geiger was one of several Noyes tenants who spoke at the meeting. He said that the tenants felt "unappreciated and disregarded," and simply wanted a solution that did not require anyone to leave.

"I'm disappointed to hear talk about who should leave instead," he said. "Aren't we so close to making room for all?"

Larry DiStasi, co-artistic director of Actor's Gymnasium and vice president of the Noyes Tenant Association, said it appeared that Piven's plans for expansion were just 1,000 square feet short of a compromise that would allow all the tenants to remain in the building, and that city officials should make every effort to accommodate all the tenants.

He also said he believed that Piven's construction budget was unrealistic. The theater group's budget is based on a previous expansion of Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre, of which DiStasi is a founding member. He said the Lookingglass expansion cost about \$291 per square foot several years ago, while Piven projects a cost of \$218 per square foot. Given the difference in estimates and the age of the building, he said he was concerned that construction costs would balloon out of control and Piven would not be able to afford the expansion.

"A smaller footprint would be the fiscally responsible thing for the city of Evanston to do," DiStasi said. "Please, please ask the Piven Theatre Workshop to reduce their footprint, for all our sakes."

Former Noyes tenant Ken Arlen, owner of Arlen Music Productions, said he, too, was concerned about the finances of the proposal. Piven currently pays about \$44,000 in rent, according to city documents, but under the expansion proposal, the city would lose not just the rent on Piven's current space but also on the space it is taking over. He pointed out that the city had entered into a similar, \$1 a month lease with the Evanston Art Center at the city-owned Harley Clarke Mansion, which is currently up for sale.

"We now have a building that is deemed too expensive to renovate," Arlen said. "I believe the Piven proposal is a potential economic Titanic."

Maggie Weiss, president of the Noyes Tenant Association, noted that the building had generated a surplus of roughly \$50,000 for the past two years, which went into the city's general fund rather than coming back to the building directly for improvements.

"What has not been shown in the Piven proposal is how the city will account for that loss in the future budget," Weiss said. "What else is going to have to be cut, and will this building end up in disrepair, just like the Harley Clarke?"

She and other tenants questioned whether the lost revenue from Piven's rent would have to be made up by raising the rent on other tenants. Speaking to Patch after the meeting, however, city manager Wally Bobkiewicz said he expected to come back with a plan demonstrating that the city would not need to raise rents. Instead, he said city officials would look for other resources to support the center, including state or federal grants or city funding.

"It's really changing the entire dynamic," he said, noting that the city was currently funding the cost of a new roof through a state grant.

Speaking in response to several of the tenants who oppose the expansion in its current iteration, Piven board president Joel Freimuth said he had yet to see another plan for the 100-year-old building, which is sorely in need of updates to its electrical wiring and air conditioning, as well as work to remove asbestos and lead.

"It doesn't need to be us that leads this charge, but we're the only ones standing here before you with a viable,

realistic plan,” he said. “The city has negotiated this lease with the best interests of the city in mind.”

Ald. Judy Fiske, whose first ward includes the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, made the motion to hold the issue in committee, saying that she could not approve a plan that did not accommodate all of the tenants.

“I would really like you to come up with those 1,000 square feet,” she said.

Fiske also said she was concerned about how the expansion might change the nature of the neighborhood, where shops close up around 8 p.m. and the business district becomes residential at night. She also questioned whether the expansion would require more parking, potentially taking over Tallmadge Park.

According to Bobkiewicz, however, no changes are proposed to the park or to parking near the building.

Ald. Grover said she had several questions she would like to see answered before voting on the issue. She wanted clarity on community service requirements for Piven going forward (something all tenants must do), as well as explanation of how the new agreement would make Noyes more self-sustaining. She also asked for more details on Piven’s ability to afford the project, and the repercussions on rent for other tenants.

The Piven expansion is expected to come up for discussion again at the next human services committee meeting in June.

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