

Should Noyes be an 'arts incubator'?



It could be "up and out" for some groups at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center if a plan broached by Evanston's city manager this week is adopted.

City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz suggested in a memo to the Human Services Committee that the arts center perhaps should become "an incubator of artists and arts organizations" rather than their "long term creative home."

Citing the now-withdrawn proposal from long-term Noyes tenant Piven Theatre Workshop to dramatically expand its space at the center, Bobkiewicz said the debate over that became "at times a very ugly process."

But, he added, it raised a lot of questions about the role Noyes should serve in the community.

He noted that Dance Center Evanston has managed to grow on its own and serve a lot of folks in the community from rented space in the Evanston Plaza shopping center.

"One of the challenges," Bobkiewicz said, "is how big is too big for Noyes. At what point should Noyes become a launching pad with successful groups at some juncture finding their own space?"

And he suggested that perhaps rents should be lower for groups that are new to the center and rise as groups become more established.

Several of the groups now at Noyes have been there for two decades or more.

Bobkiewicz proposed that the city's Arts Council and the Noyes tenants' association develop a plan for addressing those issues and others regarding the center's future and report back to the City Council by February.



Actors Gymnasium board member Sam Fishkin argued for more space for his growing group at Noyes.

Alderman Mark Tendam, 6th Ward, suggested that given mixed residential and commercial neighborhood around Noyes, "There's a limit to the size of organizations that can be accommodated there."

Downtown Evanston would be more appropriate for events drawing a larger performing arts audience, Tendam said, adding that he believed the larger groups at Noyes, including Actors Gymnasium and Next Theatre long term need to be thinking in that direction.

Meanwhile, some existing tenants, including Actors Gymnasium, are hoping to expand into spaces left vacant after some tenants moved out during the Piven expansion discussion.

Bobkiewicz said city staff would work with the tenant's association to decide how to allocate that space among new and existing tenants on short-term leases while the long range goals for the building are sorted out.

But Alderman Delores Holmes, 5th Ward, suggested Actors Gym should not get the space it most wants.

Room 106, Holmes said, has long been used as a community space for groups that aren't regular Noyes tenants -- and preserving that space, she said is very important.

The city manager said he also plans to seek approval soon to hire a consultant to conduct a complete engineering study of what capital improvements may be needed at the center.