

Noyes Cultural Arts Center: 'Revitalize' Rather Than Self-Sustaining - Evanston RoundTable - Evanston, IL

evanstonroundtable.com/main.asp

4/24/2013 2:31:00 PM

Noyes Cultural Arts Center: 'Revitalize' Rather Than Self-Sustaining



Exterior of Noyes Cultural Arts Center
Photo by Joe Linstroth

By Larry Gavin

Rather than pursuing a self-sustaining model for Noyes Cultural Arts Center, City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz told the *RoundTable* he is recommending an approach that will revitalize the center and make it a destination for art lovers in Evanston and surrounding areas.

City staff have worked out a proposed deal with Piven Theatre Workshop that will keep Piven in Evanston and allow it to increase its space from about 4,700 square feet to between 11,000 and 13,000 square feet, Leslie Brown, executive director of Piven, told the RoundTable. The deal will also provide Piven a source of funding to substantially rehab its space, including converting its 70-seat black box theatre into a two-story, state-of-the-art flexible theatre that could seat between 70 and 200 people depending on the production, Ms. Brown said.

Another theatre in the building, with 145 seats, is used by Next Theatre Company.

The Next Theatre and four other performing arts groups – Actors Gymnasium, The Evanston Children's Choir, Fleetwood Jordain Theatre and Theatre Zarko – currently lease space at Noyes. A number of artists do as well.

Because so much additional space has been allocated to Piven, it is possible that one or more organizations or artists will be squeezed out of the building.

Last week, City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz told the RoundTable he would recommend that the Evanston Children's Choir (ECC) be asked to relocate because it was the last organization to move into Noyes. This week, though, he said he withdrew that recommendation, as well as a recommendation that Maggie Weiss, a textile artist and president of the tenants' association at Noyes, be relocated to the basement at Noyes, a decision which might have effectively forced her to leave the building.

At the City Council meeting on April 22, Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl said she and City Council wanted a different set of criteria to be used – rather than seniority – to determine which artists or organizations might need to relocate from Noyes as a result of the Piven proposal.

“Revised criteria should first consider if an artist or arts organization is Evanston-based and the number of Evanston residents served by the artist or arts organization,” said Mayor Tisdahl.

The Human Services Committee will consider both the revised criteria and the tentative deal with Piven at 7:30 p.m. on May 6.

The Proposed Agreement With Piven

Piven is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. It offers a respected theatre workshop for youth and adults. Since its inception, it has staged many theatrical productions, youth ensembles and showcases.

Under the proposed deal, Piven would be required to invest \$3.2 million into the building, Mr. Bobkiewicz told the RoundTable. The City will loan Piven \$2.2 million of the \$3.2 million. Piven is required to raise \$355,500 in cash by Dec. 31, 2013 (which date may be extended), and to invest that and “in-kind” donations for architecture work, construction work, legal work, and other associated donations of time to bring the value of its contribution in the building up to \$1 million.

In addition to creating a state-of-the-art black box theatre, Ms. Brown said Piven would create a lobby for the theatre that could also be used as a community space for parents while waiting to pick up their students and as an events room. Classrooms will be rehabbed to contain lighting and seating for smaller theatrical performances, she said. Other improvements will be made, some of which may benefit everyone in the building, she said.

Under the proposed agreement, Piven will repay the \$2.2 million loan with 2 percent interest over 30 years.

If Piven raises the cash and the loan is granted, Piven will pay \$6,624.97 each year toward capital maintenance at Noyes. Its base rent will be \$1 per year for the term of the 25-year lease. It has an option to extend the lease at five-year increments up to an additional 25 years.

The proposed agreement also calls for Piven to work out a community engagement program with Mr. Bobkiewicz by Dec. 1. Piven is required to work out a schedule with Fleetwood-Jordain Theatre to use its black box theatre. In addition, Ms. Brown said Piven currently provides scholarships to Evanston residents and never turns away students because of an inability to pay.

Who’s In, Who’s Out

After learning that ECC might be forced out of Noyes last week, Executive Director Gary Geiger emailed the mayor and aldermen, explaining why ECC deserved space at Noyes. ECC deserves a place at Noyes, he said, because it is “one of Evanston’s marquee performing arts organizations second to none – not even Piven Theatre – with a reputation far beyond Evanston’s borders.”

ECC currently leases 950 square feet of space in the building that it uses for rehearsals, which are both educational and performance-based. It serves more than 100 singers and their families, 40 percent of whom are “families of color,” Mr. Geiger said. “We have room to expand to 200. ... We never turn away a kid because of money.”

At Noyes, ECC pays \$1,200 a month in rent. If it has to move to another location, the rent could double, Mr. Geiger said. He added he is not sure how ECC could handle that.

A floor plan posted on the City’s website reflects that ECC’s space at Noyes would have been allocated to the Actors Gymnasium. Larry DiStasi, artistic director of Actors Gym, told the RoundTable he was “surprised” when he saw that.

Actors Gym leases the gym at Noyes, a former school building, which it uses for its circus and aerial arts classes. Actors Gym also leases about 440 square feet of office space at Noyes, but that space is allocated to Piven under the proposed floor plan. Mr. DiStasi said the Actors Gym needs about 900 square feet of space to accommodate its employees. He said he was hoping to get Room 106, which is open space.

Mr. DiStasi said if Piven gets all the space it wants, there is not enough room for everybody in the building. He held out, though, that it should be possible to come up with a creative way to accommodate the needs of all the tenants. “It’s not being done in a very inclusive way,” he said. “They’re not trying to come up with creative solutions.”

When asked if Piven could find 1,000 square feet to provide space at Noyes for the Childrens Choir or the Actors Gym, Ms. Brown said Piven has brought “visionary architects” to the table. “We want to work with the City to come up with creative solutions,” she said. “I think there’s room for everyone.”

Self-Sustaining vs. Capital Improvements

Ms. Weiss told the RoundTable she thinks the City’s primary goal has been to keep Piven in Evanston, and the proposed deal is going to hurt Evanston taxpayers. She questions how the Noyes Cultural Art Center will be self-sustaining if Piven is only paying \$1 a year in rent for a substantial amount of the space there. The City will not be able to build up a reserve to maintain the building with Piven’s rent at that level, she says.

When asked how it would be possible for Noyes to be self-sustaining with Piven paying only \$1 per year in rent, Mr. Bobkiewicz said, “It’s not.” He said the City was initially looking at a self-sustaining approach when it began to look at Noyes a few years ago. He said the current plan has shifted.

He said the proposal on the table provides for a substantial investment in the building, which was not possible under a self-sustaining model. This approach “revitalizes the space. ... It really allows us to change the game for art lovers ... and it brings a whole lot of life to the center,” which he said has been lacking in the last few years.

While acknowledging that under the current proposal the City would have to continue subsidizing the center in the future, he pointed out that the City has been subsidizing the center in the past. He said, “I would rather have the City subsidize a center that is thriving than to continue to operate it at its current level. Investing in the center will provide vibrancy.”

Related Stories:

[Fate of Piven Theater and Noyes Center Still Undecided](#)
