

Piven Noyes Center proposal to go to full Evanston city council

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A city committee will leave it to the full City Council to decide whether a city partnership with Piven Theater Workshop for a major rehabilitation of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center makes sense or is financially untenable under its current terms.

Members of the council's Human Services Committee voted Monday night to send the issue on to the full council without any recommendations.

City Council members are scheduled to begin discussing the proposal at their July 8 meeting.

When the issue is discussed, aldermen need some kind of plan "to make sure everybody is in the same place" on the terms of the deal and financial projections, said Ald. Mark Tendam, during the committee's discussion following the heated citizen comment.

Under the proposed agreement, the city would execute a lease and construction agreement with the Piven Theater Workshop to renovate the city-owned building at 927 Noyes St.

The city would loan the nationally renowned actor's workshop \$2.2 million toward renovation of the building, a turn of the century school , which has fallen into disrepair.

Piven would make up the remaining \$1.3 funding of the project through a combination of cash, pro bono commitments, pledges, and private bank financing, City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz and Deputy City Attorney Michelle L. Masoncup wrote in a memo to the committee.

The improvements are to include the installation of a "black box" theater, increased office space, classroom space and larger rehearsal space.

While footing the capital costs, Piven would pay nominal rent of \$1 stretched out over 50 years.

Other tenants in the Noyes building, including some of Evanston's most prominent arts groups, have questioned the one-sided focus on Piven.

Joyce Piven, who co-founded Piven four decades ago with her husband, Byrne, spoke of the group's role as a training ground for students and teachers.

"We need to expand to become what we have always seen as revolutionary ... a place to provide community to young people where they can create, hear stories, share them, where they can find their own voices and take risks in a safe environment."

Some tenants continue to hold concerns about the plan, especially about the financial risks.

Larry DisStasi, vice president of the Noyes Tenants Association as well as co-artistic director of the Actor's Gymnasium, had charged at a previous meeting that Piven' proposed expansion "was too large,' and that at least 1,000 square feet of space would have to be freed up to accommodate other tenants of Noyes.

Leslie Brown, executive director of Piven, noted the organization has worked for two years, trying to accommodate some of the concerns raised by tenants while allowing Piven to remain long-term in the city.

Piven found 1,200 square feet on the building's second floor, considered prime real estate in the building, to meet the association's request for 1,000 square feet. Piven also has agreed to move part of its organization into the basement, Brown said.

She said Piven's amended proposal also calls for a change in financial terms, now including rent throughout the lease.

"We want you to know we've gone as far as we could while still safeguarding our organization for the next five decades," she said.

DiStasi said Piven is still overreaching with its current proposal.

"They have seriously underestimated the cost of renovating a 13,000 square foot building," he said.

In addition, in the deal to pay nominal rent, "means more money that the city of Evanston loses," he said.

Were Piven to pay no rent over a 30-year period, that would translate into a cumulative \$8 million loss, he said.

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