

Tour of Noyes Center an eye-opener for panel

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Aldermen on the City Council's Human Services Committee devoted a previous meeting to discussing the purpose and merits of the city-run Noyes Cultural Arts Center.

Nothing quite compares, however, with an on-site visit, as they learned Monday night.

Members of the committee moved their monthly meeting from the Civic Center to the Arts Center, located a few blocks east, at 927 Noyes St., hoping to get a closer look at the programs.

The Arts Center hosts a wide range of city art groups, individual artists and programs, ranging from the Actor's Gymnasium and the Piven Theater Workshop, to the Light Opera Works and Richard Halstead's portrait studio.

A special task force is examining the mission and goals of the center, for which the city has spent nearly \$1 million to refurbish in recent years. (The money initially was to go toward the building of a performing arts center.)

The task force is to look at the center's mission and goals.

"Topics the task force will discuss will include: the concept of an incubator, profit versus not-for-profit, community service, residents versus non-residents, office space versus studio space, and other issues," said Michelle Brodsky, chairwoman of the Evanston Arts Council, in a letter to committee members.

Douglas Gaynor, city director of Parks/Forestry and Recreation, and Harmon Greenblatt, director of the Arts Council, led aldermen on a tour of the building.

One of their first stops was the Actors Gymnasium, a group under Evanston resident Tony Adler's tutelage that trains actors in circus and performing arts.

In the studio, students were dressed in loose-fitting clothing and performed thrusts with a dagger-like instrument, expertly lunging at each other.

"Technique - a lot of technique," marveled Alderman Ann Rainey, 8th Ward.

"Movement," said Alderman Gene Feldman, 9th Ward.

"Let's not break anybody's concentration and get them stabbed," said Alderman Lionel Jean-Baptiste, 2nd Ward.

The group's next stop was an actor's workshop, where students were performing a Shakespeare monologue.

Committee members then moved to Room 109, Bonnie Kustner's writing studio. Kustner leads classes for both young people and adults.

Jean-Baptiste took a flier for a journaling course to give to a family member.

As aldermen walked down the hall, Gaynor pointed out the track lighting that creates an exhibit-like feeling to the school, a turn-of-the-century building that has been restored.

It looks "great," chorused several of the aldermen.

The group stopped in at the theater-in-the-round where Piven and The Next theater companies, both tenants in the building, put on performances.

"I have seen Goodman and Steppenwolf perform," Feldman said. "There's better theater in this place than any one of those."

On the second floor, committee members visited the offices of Light Opera Works, Evanston's home-grown light opera company.

The group has been quartered at Noyes since 1980, said Bridget McDonough, its general manager, and started off paying \$50 a month in rent.

Because of lack of space, Light Opera Works is rehearsing in churches until the group acquires a theater of its own, she said.

From there, the group stopped in at Richard Halstead's studio.

Halstead, waiting for the officials to arrive, has painted the famous and not-so famous.

Yet he seemed especially pleased to meet Rainey, and began asking her about an incident publicized several years ago where the alderman, while driving home one night, found herself in the middle of a gang melee.

"That was quite a storm," Halstead, sounding as if he were painting a portrait of the incident.

"You had to be there," Rainey said about the experience.

The last stop on the tour was Room 215, the studio of artists Elise and Jack Lerman.

Several of the aldermen drifted into the room before being warned that the class was working from a live model.

"How long can she sit like that?" asked Rainey.

"Stick with this committee, we'll take you places," said an official to a reporter, standing outside the door at the tour's last stop.

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