

Arts leaders hit Piven-Noyes plan

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By BOB SEIDENBERG | bseidenberg@pioneerlocal.com May 7, 2013 1:00PM

Gary Geiger of Evanston, the founder and director of the Evanston Children's Choir, leads the choir during rehearsal in the in their room at the Noyes Cultural Center in Evanston. | Ryan Pagelow~Sun-Times Media

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Members of a city committee said they want more information before they can move forward on a proposed lease for the Piven Theatre Workshop and a major renovation of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center.

In a two-hour packed meeting at the Lorraine H. Morton Civic Center, some arts organizations representatives leveled sharp criticism at the proposal, including the financial viability of Piven to undertake the plan and the effect on other tenants housed in the city-owned building at 927 Noyes Ave.

The proposal calls for Piven to build out space on the south side of the building with a state-of-the-art black box theater, a new air condition and heating system and renovated classrooms.

Larry DiStasi, artistic director of the Actors Gymnasium, housed in the same building as Piven said the plan "takes up too much space."

He recalled how months ago, he told committee members that other tenants in the building could be accommodated with a 1,000 square foot change in space from Piven's proposed footprint.

"I stood here before you and sounded the alarm ... and nothing has changed," he told members of the City Council's Human Services Committee.

If allowed to go through, the proposal would result in other tenants now paying below market rates, "so (Piven's) gain is our loss," he said.

After more than a year of negotiations, the city released the terms a few weeks ago, giving arts groups members were getting their first chance.

The city would loan the nationally reknown actor's workshop \$2.2 million toward renovation of the building. Piven would contribute \$1.3 million altogether, including \$1 million worth of in-kind donations for architectural and legal work and other donated services.

Piven would pay nominal rent of \$1 stretched out over 50 years, in an agreement similar to what the Lookingglass Theatre has in Chicago. Piven board member Joel Freimuth told aldermen that Piven's involvement,

which already includes \$750,000 in free contributions in architectural and other services by members, would ultimately “lower the overall cost of the project, shorten the time,” and achieve a significant better result for taxpayers in renovation of Noyes, a nearly 100-year-old former school building.

He said the project would prove a boon to the surrounding Noyes community and result in the Noyes Cultural Arts center becoming the “cultural landmark it was always meant to be.”

A majority of other speakers, though, spoke about the plan’s overemphasis on Piven and questionable assumptions.

Gary Geiger, director and founder of the Evanston’s Children’s Choir housed in Noyes, observed a serious “disconnect.”

City officials pulled back from a move a few weeks ago after first notifying the choir it would have to vacate the center because of the future layout.

“There has been a lot of talk about seeing the Noyes Center revitalized with activity,” he told committee members. “The Evanston Children’s Choir brings over 100 kids and their family members through its doors every week with capacity to expand to over 200.”

He noted the uncertainty at Noyes has already resulted in the loss of a number of tenants, including the Light Opera Works and Arlen Music Productions.

“Noyes Center artists by and large feel unappreciated and disregarded, and this whole idea of having to force some tenants out has everyone on edge and is seriously straining relationships,” he said.

Other speakers sounded a similar theme.

Joanna Pinsky, founder and artistic director of Art Encounter, a non-profit visual arts education group also housed in Noyes, said that while she likes Piven, “I would really like to see them offer some compromise.”

“I am worried how they are going to meet this wonderful financial goal they claim,” she said. “I think it’s all conjecture.”

Another speaker, questioning the projections, called the project “an economic Titanic.”

In brief discussion following the testimony, members of the Human Services Committee were almost unanimous that a number of points need to be addressed.

Alderman Judy Fiske, in whose First Ward the center is partially located, said officials seriously have to look at the extra 1,000 square feet cited by one speaker and address other concerns.

Alderman Mark Tendam said he was concerned about the whole proposal, which he maintained doesn’t “give us much optimism or great expectations for the future,” and said there was need to “really look at some other possibilities,” including those put forward by organizations other than Piven.

Staff is scheduled to respond with answers to some of the concerns at the Human Services Committee’s June meeting.