

A Proposal for the Restoration of the Platteville Municipal Auditorium

Presented by the Platteville Arts Board
and the Platteville Community Theater

Summary

The purpose of this proposal is to present the Platteville Common Council and City Manager with information regarding the history and current situation of the Municipal Auditorium. The Auditorium is a community element, used by Platteville citizens throughout its history. The problems facing basic operation of the theater range from comfort issues to safety concerns. Real cost estimates for renovating the theater fall far short of the Bray Associates' facilities study, and are well within the range of the City's budget and Capital Improvement Plan. Moreover, renovation and support through staffing the theater can lead to increased revenue for the City. The Platteville Arts Board is requesting financial support from the City on behalf of the Platteville Community to complete necessary updates and maintenance as matching support to what has been already contributed through fundraising and significant contributions in time and labor by the Platteville Community Theater.

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History and Place in the Community

The Municipal Auditorium has been an important part of Platteville's history since its construction in the 1920s when the design committee created a 1,000-seat theater for our small, rural community. Since its opening night in 1929, the auditorium has been a cultural center for Platteville, hosting a variety of events, activities, and groups including:

- Vaudeville Theater
- High School Graduations
- School plays
- Minstrel shows
- City Band concerts
- Children's shows of the 50s, 60s, and 70s
- Community group events
- Christmas activities, including Santa's annual visit and Cocoa and Carols
- Memorial Day celebration
- Special events, such as the 9/11 play
- Dance recitals
- D.A.R.E. Graduation events
- Wisconsin Association of Community Theater AACT Fest (State Community Theater Competition)
- Platteville Community Theater performances (approximately 3 shows per year)
- Church events
- St. Mary's School performances
- Cuba City School performances
- Greater Midwestern Theatre Company performances
- Home School events and play rehearsal
- Knob Hill Boys bluegrass group
- Oasis (two major events each year)
- Platteville Rotary Club
- Platteville Public Library
- Catholic Knights Insurance Society
- Non-partisan political events
- The Nutcracker, a collaborative effort between Southwest Dance and Ballet Academy, Platteville Community Theater, and Mineral Point Shake Rag Players
- Wisconsin Poet Laureate in partnership with the Platteville Public Library
- ArtsBuild
- Rehearsal space for summer family theater productions

Current Limitations

The upkeep of the auditorium itself has been almost entirely neglected as the building has aged, and some work done on the building has created problems for the theater. The Platteville Community Theater regularly receives verbal complaints regarding the sound, lights, seating, and climate control, and patrons have gone so far as to walk out of performances because they cannot see or hear well enough.

To cope with these issues, The Platteville Community Theater group has shouldered full responsibility for the space by maintaining and upgrading the auditorium as their limited budget, time, and ability has allowed, with little assistance from the City. Platteville Community Theater also maintains the stage

space and seating area for all events, has added a removable stage area over the orchestra pit, and has painted and upgraded the dressing rooms in the basement. Most notably, all of their work has been done on an entirely volunteer basis.

Inadequate lighting:

- During an electrical system renovation, the lighting control was removed, and inadequate flood lighting was installed for the stage
- The Platteville Community Theater group paid to have a rudimentary lighting system restored and was lucky enough to have a lighting control system donated; however, the age of the system makes parts very hard to come by, and maintenance has been difficult.
- The Home School Theater group currently only rehearses in the auditorium, and then presents their performances in the Platteville High School auditorium due to lighting limitations.
- Currently, the Platteville Community Theater President, Dick Davies, is the only person expected to be available at all times to run the lights for any use of the theater, including non-PCT events, and volunteers his personal time for this with no compensation.
- Upgraded lighting would include preset features that would reduce the need for PCT volunteers.

Inadequate sound:

- Police station construction reduced the size of the auditorium and caused problems with the original acoustic architecture.
- Poor acoustics has contributed to low attendance at events held in the auditorium.

Public Safety:

- The stage floor is original, and can be dangerous for performers, especially for dancers. The Southwest Dance and Ballet Academy would use the space more often for recitals if the floor was upgraded to a safer condition for their dancers.
- Some rigging work was done as a result of a donation in 2003, but the system remains woefully inadequate and is in constant danger of failure, posing a threat to anyone using the stage and an insurance liability to the city.

Climate Control:

- Currently, performances cannot be held year-round. There is no air conditioning for summer performances, and the heat cannot be controlled during winter months and the space becomes overheated. This severely limits the ability to pursue a presentation business model for bringing outside shows to the space.

Seating:

- The seats are original to the theater, and pose comfort issues to a variety of patrons, including the elderly, those with back problems, those with weight issues, and tall people with long legs, due to the limited space between the rows.

Funding:

- Those who maintain and run the theater currently receive no funding for operations. All work is done on an entirely volunteer basis.

Current Cost Estimates

• **Lighting and Sound** — In 2006, Lifeline Amplification Systems performed an acoustical and lighting analysis and provided a budget estimate at no charge. This estimate included the most basic, functional elements for improvements, and is by no means an elite system of lighting and sound. No lighting or sound related instruments, such as fixtures and microphones would be included. It is also important to note that these figures were estimated nearly two years ago. With no action taken, it's possible that the fees could have increased during this time.

Acoustical improvements were estimated to cost between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Sound improvements were estimated to cost between \$50,000 and \$60,000. Lighting was estimated to cost \$25,000.

TOTAL COST ESTIMATE: \$105,000 - \$135,000

• **Seating** — Currently there are 550 seats in the theater, originally installed in the 1920s. Replacement is estimated at \$300 per seat.

TOTAL COST ESTIMATE: \$165,000

• **Fly Space** — Backstage and above-stage mechanics including curtain mechanisms, prop and set manipulation systems, etc. Current fly space is original to the theater, built and installed in the 1920s.

TOTAL COST ESTIMATE: \$100,000

• **Stage floor** — The current stage floor is original to the theater with limited cosmetic maintenance performed over the years. The stage is in need of replacement or significant renovation. Cost is unknown at this time.

TOTAL COST ESTIMATE: To be determined.

• **Heating, ventilation, and Air Conditioning** — Budget item included in the City's Capital Improvement Plan.

TOTAL COST ESTIMATE: \$0

• **Electrical** — Budget item included in the City's Capital Improvement Plan.

TOTAL COST ESTIMATE: \$0

• **Staffing** — A part-time hourly or salaried position should be created to compensate staffing that is currently provided at an entirely volunteer basis. This position would allow for a focused effort to seek out and program events in the theater. Cost estimate for a part time theater manager salary is \$20,000 annually. A half-time position could be created to manage the house, coordinate scheduling, promote events, and control lighting and sound for performances and use. This position could also apply for grants that would pay for presenting events in the theater.

TOTAL COST ESTIMATE: To be determined

Cost Summary

For minimum improvements, not including annual staffing salary or the stage floor as an estimate is not available at this time, the projected total cost of renovation of the Auditorium is **\$400,000**.

Potential Future Uses

With basic upgrades to lighting, sound, stage floor, and seating, the Platteville Municipal Auditorium has the potential to host a wide variety of community focused performances including Platteville Community Theater productions, youth music and theatrical performances, poetry readings, live music, guest speaker forums, and potential film festivals. There are some performances that seek out this specific style of theater. It would also increase the ability to form unique partnerships with other city and community organizations, surrounding communities, area schools, youth groups, and area businesses.

There is great potential for this space to be used for bigger things as a central jewel to the proposed Cultural Center planned for the historical Municipal Building. If we can host the State's Poet Laureate in the space as it is, imagine what else could be done with a fully functional, comfortable, and most importantly, affordable space. The auditorium could serve a much more significant economic development role for the city, bringing in both attendees and performers from around the region to support our city.

Solutions

As you know, the Platteville Community Theater group and the Platteville Arts Board have been working together to find assistance and funding for improving the Municipal Auditorium. Unfortunately, our volunteers lack the necessary expertise to undertake a historical restoration of this nature. Moreover, it is impossible to find bulk funding outside of historical renovation for theater improvement projects in the amounts that the City's Auditorium needs. Nearly all grants dispensed for art programs specific to theaters are given for presentation and productions and not for the kind of repairs and improvements that the City's Municipal Auditorium requires for full safety and functionality.

It's important to note that the Bray Associates' estimate for the theater involves a state-of-the-art restoration at a very high cost of \$1.1 million. The proposed system is far and above the needs of our community. Obviously, a middle ground can be found.

The City has two very effective avenues of funding to complete the bare minimum of improvements to the theater to bring it up to a basic level of functionality.

First, the City has access to, and ultimate discretion regarding the Graham Fund. Half of the \$250,000 of this money to be distributed could complete the bare necessity of the lighting, sound, and acoustic improvements outlined by Lifeline Amplification Systems in their 2006 estimate. This means that these issues, the most immediate and significant problems in the theater, could be corrected at absolutely **no cost** to the City.

We understand that the Parks and Recreation Department has not only earmarked all of these funds for the Prairie View Park project, but has also already received some distribution from it. It is important to note that not only does such a project have more grant funding opportunities than a theater, but a park will serve only the existing community. A fully functional theater would serve Platteville and the region as a whole, and has the potential to draw in business from outside the city. A working theater has the potential to have a much greater economic impact for our city than a park. Allocating \$125,000 from the Graham Fund would be a better investment of that money; repairing the theater would provide an immediate return in terms of economic stimulus—these funds could turn the theater back on as fast as Lifeline could complete their lighting and sound improvements.

Second, the City can consult with those who have been working with the theater enough to know the issues and improvements that have the most impact on the theater to find a more reasonable estimate of cost for the remaining improvements, and include the theater upgrade in the Cultural Center aspect of the Capital Improvement Plan. At the unveiling meeting regarding the Bray Associates' plan and estimate, City Manager David Berner reported that the City's financial state is sound, and the City would not have to raise taxes to complete the plan, including the Cultural Center idea. If \$125,000 of the Graham Fund were allocated to the theater, then only \$265,000 would remain for the basic improvements the theater needs.

Finally, the City currently charges between \$30.00 and \$156.00 per day for use. With effective theater management and a focused business plan, an updated theater could generate significant revenue through this usage fee with a rental- or presentation-based business model.

Conclusion

There is a history of improving and repairing the City's Municipal Building around the theater, but the Auditorium itself has been largely ignored. To date, the City's most significant contribution to the Auditorium, for the sake of the theater itself, was the allocation of \$20,000 in 2003 from the city's hotel room tax funds, which funded the replacement of the stage curtains. Boiler replacement, asbestos abatement, tuck pointing, and roof repairs that have been done are safety and legal requirements necessary for upkeep of the entire structure, and were not done for the sake of the theater.

Since its inception, Platteville Community Theater has assumed a primary responsibility for maintenance, upkeep, and regular improvements to the Municipal Auditorium without direct funding from the city, compensation for the operation of equipment, or reimbursement for improvements to date. Despite the efforts of the Platteville Community Theater group, the space is still in need of upgrades to facilitate increased use and enjoyment of this space by the Platteville community as a whole. We feel that the auditorium ultimately falls under the scope of the Buildings and Grounds department of the City, as a City building, and are asking that the City lead a partnership with the Platteville Arts Board and the Platteville Community Theater to take immediate action to upgrade the Auditorium's sound and lighting to an acceptable level and set a time line and plan for funding future improvements. This increased support and collaboration will facilitate the momentum necessary to preserve a vital component to the identified future use of the Municipal Building as a "Cultural Center" through the City's Capital Improvement Plan.

The City's Capital Improvement Plan reflects an estimate for upgrades to the auditorium. The Bray Associates' proposal includes an option to renovate the space around the theater into a "Cultural Center" that encompasses the Rountree Gallery, Parks and Recreation, and the City's Senior Center, yet the Auditorium Restoration, the theater, a bastion of culture in and of itself, remains "optional." A Cultural Center cannot truly fulfill its intended role with the glaring omission of one of the foundations of community culture.

We are the beneficiaries of the great foresight shown by Platteville's leaders of decades past: those who conceived, funded, built, and spent years enjoying our Municipal Auditorium. It is time for our community to accept our collective responsibility as stewards of this great gift.

Please make a commitment to the restoration of our Municipal Auditorium, not only for our use, but for the future of the fine City of Platteville.