

# EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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Tuesday, August 17, 2010

## New Direction for Performing Arts Center Project at Old Varsity Theatre Site

By Anna Sanders

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The fate of the Varsity Theatre – part of a local landmark building on Sherman Avenue at Church Street – is now in the hands of Downtown Evanston (formerly known as Evmark). Carolyn Dellutri, executive director of Downtown Evanston, presented the not-for-profit organization's plans for the theater at the Aug. 9 City Council meeting.

"We are pleased to come before you tonight to announce that Downtown Evanston is taking responsibility to move forward with creating a vision for a cultural arts facility located in the former Varsity Theatre building on Sherman Avenue in Downtown Evanston," Ms. Dellutri said.

One of the the goals of Downtown Evanston, determined at a workshop last March, is to "promote performing arts in Evanston" through a possible performing arts center in the old Varsity Theater, Ms. Dellutri said. She added that the means for achieving this goal are creating a project team with stakeholders and partners, raising funds, conducting a feasibility study and identifying possible users of the space.

Ms. Dellutri said Steve Rogen, who owns the building on Sherman Avenue that holds some of the remains of the old movie theater, has been in contact with Kennedy Smith, a principal of the consulting group Community Land Use and Economics Group. Ms. Smith recently visited the Varsity Theater. , said Ms. Dellutri.

"Ms. Smith visited and toured the theater, met with the owner and City Manager ... and was impressed with the facility and the interest in the community," said Ms. Dellutri. She said Ms. Smith proposed several options for the theater's renovation, such as forming a research team and conducting a feasibility study of the project.

Ms. Dellutri said whoever assists in the renovations "need[s] to understand the theater's constraints. ... We're putting together a team that's going to say, 'You can do A, B. or C,'" Ms. Dellutri said.



Remains of the old Varsity movie theater are found on the second floor of this building on Sherman Avenue.

The team will include an architect, a theatre programming expert and a theatre rehabilitation finance and fundraising expert, Ms. Dellutri said.

This iteration of the revitalization of the Varsity Theatre began in the spring at the March 8 City Council meeting, at which aldermen approved the potential renovation of the theater into a performing arts center with funds provided by the National Endowment of the Arts. The NEA grant of \$50,000 would have been matched with \$50,000 from the City's Washington National tax-increment financing (TIF) fund.

However, on June 4, City Manger Wally Bobkiewicz told City Council the NEA grant application had been submitted with the wrong identification number for the City of Evanston.

Though the future of the project has been vague since Mr. Bobkiewicz's announcement, Ms. Dellutri's presentation may have offered some hope for those still eager for the theater's renovation.

"Our goal is to report back to the City Council periodically on the process and hopefully return to you with a vision for the second floor of the former Varsity Theatre building by 2011," Ms. Dellutri concluded.

After the presentation, Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl thanked Ms. Dellutri for what she termed a "hopeful speech."

Alderman Judy Fiske, 1st Ward, joked that Ms. Dellutri has been "braver than I am" for climbing up to the theater multiple times, which can only be accessed through a narrow ladder.

Ald. Fiske said she wanted to "thank everyone involved... [who has] created what I believe will be an economic engine for the downtown...the building is fabulous."

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