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Butler and the Royals beat Baltimore.
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Auditorium conversion has at least one backer

Butler says it would be convenient, reduce debt

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A city commissioner argued Thursday for retention of a controversial revamp of City Hall that eliminates the stage in the portion of the building formally known as Peace Memorial Auditorium. Commissioner Wynn Butler said at an open house on the

project that opponents are losing sight of the pluses associated with the current proposal.

Butler's comments were in reaction to those made by community members to the Historic Resources Board on Monday. Butler said that the city's Parks and Recreation office has been passed over for several years in consideration of capital improvements because they were deemed "not important enough" to get new office space. The current offices at City Park

were converted from a shop more than 30 years ago.

He said moving Parks and Rec offices inside City Hall, one of the key elements of the revamp, will create a one-stop shop for residents seeking a variety of services from pet licenses to pool passes. In addition, he said the city will eliminate two customer service staff positions through attrition. He said those two positions alone will pay for the remodel of the auditorium, which is in need of an update and

repair, while eliminating the need to add more debt.

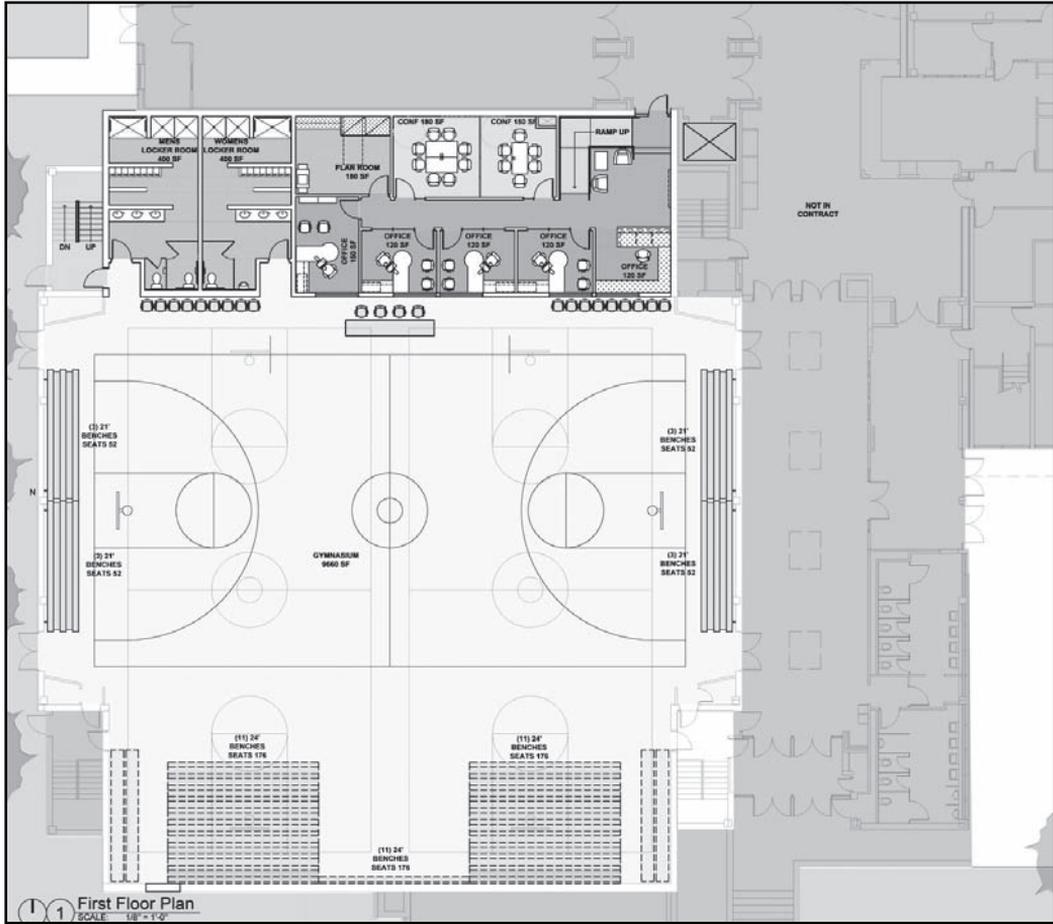
The city's proposed revamp envisions removing the existing permanent seating area in favor of Parks and Rec offices. At the same time, the stage would be removed and that space would be converted into two narrow basketball courts that would run perpendicular to and partially overlap the current basketball court.

It is removal of the stage that has caused the most controversy. Opponents have noted that the

stage and auditorium were constructed as a memorial to the city's World War II veterans, and should be maintained in that spirit. They have particularly been critical of the proposed loss of the stage area, which they contend the city has needlessly allowed to deteriorate.

The consensus by city staff and commissioners is that the city is aware of the deteriorating condition of the auditorium, and that if

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An architect's rendering of the proposed revamp of the city auditorium. Changes include replacing the current permanent seating area with parks and rec offices (above), and replacing the stage area (below with two smaller basketball courts, which would also run perpendicular to and partially overlay the existing court (center).

Auditorium conversion

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it is not fixed soon, it will be unusable by anyone in the community.

Butler said he understands the arts community wants the stage left in place, but it ultimately comes down to money. He said the original plans for the auditorium included a kitchen and a gun range, but adequate space and cost eliminated those two elements early in development in 1955, when the auditorium was built. As for the remodel, he said theatrical productions would be the only thing the city would be sacrificing. He said other productions could be put on at the auditorium with portable stages, which the city already owns.

So, for Butler, "nothing has changed."

Attendees at the open house generally defended the stage.

Nancy Woodford, a member of Daughters of the American Revolution,

called it "something historic," and said added "there's just got to be another way to do it."

Not everyone at the meeting, however, shared those sentiments.

Don Slater, a life-long resident of Manhattan and veteran who served in the '50s and '60s, said he thought the city was moving in the right direction. He said there is a definite need for more athletic space for the public, and the current design addresses that need. In addition, he said he didn't see how the remodel was a departure from the memorial because the building will still be there. He said the stage is "immaterial;" it is the auditorium that is significant.

"You go through life, everything is a memorial to someone," Slater said. "That's their personal choice."

Commissioner Usha Reddi said she was still undecided about the change. She said what the

commission needs to do is be respectful to all community members, but at the same time make a decision that is best for the community and the city.

"We're not going to make everybody happy," she said. "But that doesn't mean we need to start attacking those who disagree."

Jason Hilgers, deputy city manager, told attendees the project is still in preliminary stages, and the current design is not necessarily the final one. He said the proposal will go before the commission later this fall. Like those in attendance at the meeting, he said city staff has received feedback both supporting keeping the stage, and the idea of creating more gym space. He said on a personal level, he has heard more support for gym space, but he admitted his involvement with his kids' sports activities creates an opportunity to hear more members who support more athletics space.