

Review of stage is backed

Historic board asks city to rethink renovation plan

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Following an emotionally charged discussion, members of the city's Historic Resources Board unanimously recommended Monday that a study be performed on alternatives to the city's plan to renovate Peace Memorial Auditorium in City Hall.

The problem, board members concluded, was the impact the proposed renovations would have on the stage area, which is slated for removal in the existing proposal.

"I do agree there is great historical significance to the community," said Patrick Schaub, chair of the board, said of the stage, which is viewed as a central facet of the auditorium. That area was constructed in 1955 as a memorial to the city's World War II veterans. "The worst possible thing, the most disrespectful thing, is to allow this to fall to a state where it's not useful to anyone," Schaub said.

Current designs for the proposed remodeling would remove the stage as well as the permanent seating in the auditorium. The seating section would be converted into two-story office space for the Parks and Recreation department, whose offices are presently in City Park. The stage would be removed to create two more basketball/volleyball

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courts, which would be used by community members. Roll-out bleachers would be installed in the current stage area to give audience members watching various games a place to sit.

Jim Sharp, veteran and member of the VFW and American Legion, was moved to tears in discussing the proposed renovations.

A member of the local Battle of the Bulge veterans group, Sharp said they had discussed placing a memorial to the battle in Manhattan. But after hearing what the city planned to do to the auditorium, he said they may need to “rethink that now.”

“I don’t think we’re going to do that if you’re going to tear it down in 50 years or rip the heart out of it, and that’s what you’re talking about here,” Sharp said. “You’re tearing the heart out of the Peace Memorial Auditorium, and it’s not just any old auditorium; it’s a memorial.”

Other veterans and community members echoed Sharp’s sentiments.

Randi Dale, who has led the local fight to preserve the stage, said until the 1990s there were three racks of lights behind the curtain that worked and lit the stage well. But over the past several years, she said, the lights have not been repaired or replaced, and only one rack still works, leaving most of the stage in darkness. She said five spotlights in the ceiling in front of the stage have also fallen into disrepair.

As part of their rationale for eliminating the stage, city officials have noted its very light use. But Dale

said there were two reasons for that. The first was the lack of air conditioning in the auditorium. She said if there was air conditioning, the summer youth theater programming could be held in the auditorium rather than outside, especially during inclement weather. She said Arts in the Park could also use the stage when it rained or was too hot to put on a production outside.

The second reason was lack of knowledge among local residents. Dale brought a letter from the owners of the Sisters of Sound in Aggieville stating that the owners were not aware the stage existed. If they had known, the letter said, they would have booked bands to perform because there are a large number of college students under 21 or not wanting to go to the local bars to watch a performance.

Jason Hilgers, deputy city manager, apologized for not bringing the HRB board into the process sooner. He said the city first considered remodeling the auditorium in June of last year, but no one involved with the idea was even aware the auditorium was a memorial. He said it wasn’t until Linda Glasgow, archivist and librarian for the Riley County Historical Museum, was asked by the city to research the history of the auditorium that they were informed of its status, even though there is a plaque outside the auditorium designating it as one.

Board member Dixie West asked for a list of all city owned buildings that are more than 50 years old, so when the city decides to renovate any of them, the board would be made aware of it.