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“New Use for the Auditorium”

Three years ago when the City of Norfolk administrative offices moved out of the City auditorium, there was a question as to the big brick building's future in the community. Should it be demolished? Sold? Maintained by taxpayers although it sits idle a majority of the time? The answer may be that it remains a vital part of the community if the City Council approves giving it to the Norfolk YMCA for their gymnastics program.

“The mayor and council charged City staff more than a year ago to investigate the use of the auditorium and the costs to the City to continue owning it. During that time the YMCA Board of Directors submitted a proposal to a council sub-committee to purchase it for their gymnastics program. It fits into the YMCA's long term mission and the City is able to support a non-profit organization that has a history of providing solid recreation opportunities for the community's kids,” said Shane Weidner, Norfolk City Administrator.



The auditorium was built as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in 1939. Once the center of activity for Norfolk, it is now used only a few times a year mostly for fundraisers. A gun show is held there once a year as is a pancake feed, craft show and hunters' banquets. Weidner said those groups may need to look for businesses in Norfolk that can accommodate their needs. There are a few league basketball and volleyball games still played at the auditorium. Hagedorn and Weidner said the YMCA and City would help find alternate sites for those games.

“The auditorium brings in about \$2,400 a year from events held there but it costs the City \$43,200 annually for general maintenance, utilities and insurance. This means we're using \$40,800 of tax dollars each year to operate the auditorium,” Weidner said.

Estimated cost to demolish the auditorium is \$100,000 with an additional \$50,000 fee for asbestos mitigation. A fire alarm upgrade, window repair, and storage tank removal will require an additional \$90,000 improvement costs in the future. Recent improvements to the auditorium include the boiler that was replaced in 2004 for \$85,000 and a roof replacement in 2005 for \$115,000.

“We need the space as our current gymnastics program is full to overflowing. Over 200 kids ages 18 months to high school seniors are in gymnastics six days a week 51 weeks a year. We have the potential of another 50 to 80

kids participating if we had more space,” said Randy Hagedorn, Executive Director of the Norfolk YMCA, “Right now we have kids running through doorways to vault because the room isn’t long enough. Other gymnasts are nearly hitting their feet on the ceiling while performing their uneven bar routines because our ceilings are not high enough. The more advanced gymnasts have to go to Omaha or Lincoln because our current facility isn’t equipped to train upper level gymnasts.” He added that moving gymnastics to the auditorium would free up the space at the YMCA for other programs.

Weidner will give a special presentation on the future of the auditorium as it relates to the YMCA at the May 18 City Council meeting.

“The auditorium has served the community well for many years and will continue to serve the recreational needs of Norfolk citizens through the efforts of the YMCA for many years to come,” Weidner said.