



City of Bristol

RESPICE, ADSPICE, PROSPICE
Look to the Past, Look to the Present, Look to the Future

July 14, 2015

Dear Mayor Cockayne and Members of the City Council,

After 15 months of work, and with input from several hundred citizens and community leaders, the Memorial Boulevard Task Force recommends the City Council use the building and grounds to create a community cultural and arts center and pursue the immediate development of the theater and first floor, described as the "first phase" in the [Drummeay Rosane Anderson \(DRA\) planning report](#).

The Task Force analyzed several alternatives, from a wide variety of aspects, as shown by the [summary grid](#) attached. In addition, we performed a great deal of research and accumulated a large amount of data in support of our recommendations, most of which may be found at www.bristolct.gov/mbstf.

Some [fast facts](#) to provide the foundation of our analysis are: the total gross building area of the former school is 96,800 square feet and the rentable portion of the building (minus the theater) is approximately 45,000 square feet. If one were to build a new building similar to this one today, it would cost an estimated \$38,720,000. By all accounts, the structure and building shell of the former school is in good physical condition, with upgrades needed in the areas of electrical, mechanical, code and accessibility.

The result of our analysis is that we concur with many of the [Planning Commission's recommendations](#) regarding the re-use of this building as the "Memorial Boulevard Community Cultural Center." This recommendation includes the following components:

I. Creation of a non-profit management entity with building ownership remaining with the city in the short-term, and eventually turned over to a non-profit entity for long-term operations.

The Task Force endorses this hybrid option for building ownership where the city maintains ownership of the building until such time as it is brought up to reasonable code compliance and becomes financially sustainable, whereby ownership is then transferred to a nonprofit entity. This also mirrors demographic and trending data concerning re-use of decommissioned schools across the nation, as well as in the Northeast and even across our state and region. As "developer" of the project, the non-profit would be charged with protecting the landmark, promoting arts, theater and other uses such as shared office space, business incubators, non-profit organizations, and be in a position to take advantage of a greater pool of resources such as grants and offer tax-deductible donations to donors, as well as leverage non-profit rates for goods and services.

While the Task Force recommends the city maintain ownership of the building in the short-run until it can be brought up to a reasonable, functional level of code compliance, it is not anticipated the city should be responsible for funding all code compliance efforts. Rather, the Task Force envisions the city and created non-profit entity will work together to seek state, federal and private grants and donations to fund code compliance activities needed to bring the building back to functional status. Under this scenario, the Task Force recommends the city fund a portion of seed monies related to phase one renovations (\$2-3 million) and offer matching funds (up to a determined limit) to better attract outside public and private funds.

Furthermore, if, over the next 3-5 years, the city and non-profit entity fail to garner sufficient outside public and private funds to renovate the building to functional status, the potential exists that the city may then consider soliciting for private commercial entities to provide all or a portion of building renovation monies either through acquisition of the property or in partnership with the city. Finally, in the interim, while the city and non-profit entity seek outside support for building code renovations, the Task Force recommends the city's "seed" money for phase 1 renovations focus on bringing the theater and first floor on line as the Task Force envisions the theater will always remain under city ownership and/or control and the surrounding first floor rooms and facilities can be used to support theater activities and potential other non-profit efforts and organizations. To this end, phase 1 activities may also include repurposing the building and/or theater to allow for ongoing use of the theater and first floor for community, arts and cultural activities.

The Task Force Theater Sub-Committee evaluated a number of entities that were presented in the [October 2014 Theater report](#). Two projects that stand out as models are the [Niagara Arts & Cultural Center \(NACC\)](#), due to the similarities of community size and demographics, the space and theater, and strategic multi-year plan implemented for their renovations. The second model evaluated was the [Operating Agreement between The Palace Theater and the City of Waterbury](#). Of note is data from NACC which shows that by the end of its third year of operations, all available rooms had become rented and the large common areas had been repurposed. Today, there is a waiting list for space at the NACC, and since 2002, there have been hundreds of exhibits in the two galleries, and two theaters in the building have become venues for a variety of performances and serve as an economic and community development catalyst for Niagara Falls, NY, which has a higher than average commercial vacancy rate, growing minority population, and other economic and business development stresses like Bristol. As such, NACC serves as a beacon and positive iconic symbol for Niagara Falls that is recognized and embraced by the entire city and surrounding region – much like the Palace Theater is in Waterbury.

This is the vision for Memorial Boulevard School that was proven out at a variety of events and concerts hosted in the MBS theater over the past eight months. Average attendance per event was in excess of 500 people and the exceptional boost in business at local bars and restaurants before and after each event was tremendous. Plus the increase in morale and "buzz" from local citizens about the resurgence of life and hope for downtown, following years of decline, was, and is, exactly as Albert Rockwell envisioned when he donated the property and built the building for the citizens of the city. If you look on the building façade itself you will see several plaques engraved by Rockwell that give testament to the city's embrace of the arts and sciences. In essence, the Veterans Memorial Boulevard and the Memorial Boulevard School evoke more civic pride and emotion than even the old Post Office on Main Street.

Summary Point: The Task Force recommends that the City retain ownership for the first 3-5 years and be responsible for the code upgrades as the non-profit entity ramps up and creates a board of directors, begins fundraising, and prepares to take ownership and responsibility for future phases of renovations in subsequent years. At this point, the nonprofit is committed to pursuing a path that would lead to potentially reimbursing the City for some portion of its Phase 1 outlays by the end of the study period as a show of good faith and partnership. Revenues and operating costs of the theatre and building will be the responsibility of the non-for profit.

Action Point: Upon receipt and approval of the Task Force's recommendation, the process of creating a 501c3 organization and board of directors that will then commence operating the theater and seek appropriate grants, donations and fundraising initiatives.

II. Recommended End Uses for the Building (non-theater).

The Task Force reviewed past proposals and efforts taken by previous Committees and Administrations concerning reuse of the building, and polled dozens of Bristol citizens and community leaders. These

actions produced a long list of potential tenants and uses for the building and theater. The list was then narrowed down to a set of priorities that were analyzed in greater detail for marketability, rental income, space and amenity requirements – and compared with other available venues of a similar nature across the state and region. Further, several potential tenants were given tours of the building to gather feedback as to suitability of space, structure and amenities for a variety of uses from artist studios to restaurants to educational purposes.

In addition, the grounds of the school were assessed to serve many uses in conjunction with the inside of the building, or as standalone activities such as outdoor displays, festivals, musical events, sport and recreational events and the like. Further, parking for the variety of use cases studied was deemed inadequate as is and the Task Force worked with DRA to develop additional parking options including adding parking in the front and back of the building, as well as closing the extension of Willis Street that runs between the school and Associated Spring and turning that into more parking. The Task Force even spoke with Associated Spring management who expressed a willingness to work with the City on this issue and generously donated use of a portion of their parking lot for theater event overflow parking.

In all cases, we found the space, lighting, structure, layout, location and amenities of the building were viewed as exceptional by potential tenants and compared very highly against other venues across the state and region. Furthermore, anticipated operational income from a variety of use cases was calculated to more than cover expected operational costs of the building on an annualized basis within an estimated 3-5 year timeframe. Therefore, this is the timeframe the Task Force anticipates the City would maintain ownership of the building until it can be transferred to a non-profit going forward.

That said, the Task Force believes strongly that the real value of the school lies in its ability to serve as a major economic and quality of life engine for the entire city and especially the downtown area. While the building can more than cover its own operating costs, the real “bang for the buck” will come from the anticipated increase in commercial activity across the city and downtown, as well as increase in the City’s reputation and quality of life attractiveness to new residents and visitors. This was, again, proved out by the many “test” events the Task Force hosted at the school over the past 8 months. In addition, a vibrant community and arts center would add tremendous value to other nearby properties such as Depot Square and businesses along Riverside Avenue, even out to the West End. As much as Muzzy Field, Giamatti Center, and Boys and Girls Club attract people to Bristol from inside and out, the Memorial Boulevard theater, studios, classrooms, restaurants and other uses, will far surpass these other iconic venues in impact on the local economy, jobs and quality of life, making the city and downtown more attractive to both old and future generations for decades to come.

Summary Point: The components recommended by the Task Force would potentially include community center/arts components, incubator/co-working spaces, and potentially other tenants such as municipal uses, non-profit or civic uses, arts, visitor’s center, start-ups, retail and/or restaurant/pub. In this plan, the non-profit entity becomes the developer of the site, to include protecting the landmark building and serving as a tax-friendly grant recipient and donation engine.

Action Point: Upon receipt and approval of the Task Force’s recommendations, the Task Force will confer with the Planning and Land Use office concerning the Special Permit uses for single family residential zones that may be needed to ensure the building’s future use is in compliance; as well as with the Building Department and Fire Marshal.

III. The Historic District nomination (national) would be pursued. We currently only have state historic registry designation.

The [history of Albert Rockwell](#) and his corporate and philanthropic contributions to the city are well documented. In 1919, he proposed donating his Dunbar Meadows parcel as the location for a new high

school and gateway boulevard to the city. The city accepted his donation and proposal to serve as the unpaid clerk of the works. At the opening ceremonies for the new high school held on January 30, 1923, Board of Education Chair Noble Pierce noted the importance of quality of life for a city when he said:

“The honor of the city will dwell here; this building will give fame and glory to the city. It will hold here, and attract here, citizens of the very best class. It adds strength to businesses and value to all property, every farm is richer, every piece of real estate is worth more. The business of every merchant will be better, the churches will be stronger, and life in this city richer and better because of this building.”

Quality of life continues to be a major point that advocates can point to as a reason for investment in this project, with data showing that there is a direct correlation between arts & culture and economic impact. Every year the City chooses a variety of capital projects to fund. The Task Force’s position is that this project is worthy of capital investment for the future benefits it will convey. The Task Force further believes that, in addition to City investment, the building and surrounding grounds would qualify for state, federal and private grants and donations that can be used over time to meet code and infrastructure improvement needs as described in the DRA report as phases. The point to emphasize here is that the City would not be expected to cover the entire cost of building and grounds improvements, nor would all improvements need to be completed upfront before occupancy and use of the facility begins.

Summary Point: The former high school is a physical part of the City’s architectural fabric with its rich history as well as strategic location as the gateway to downtown and overlooking Veterans Memorial Boulevard. The pursuit of the National Register of Historic Places will affirm its place as part of Bristol’s community story, as well as create additional funding and grant opportunities.

Action Point: Upon receipt and approval of the Task Force’s recommendation, a consultant will be sought to list the building on the National Register of Historic Places will commence. Benefits to this activity include eligibility for [federal tax credits](#) and grants.

IV. The “Dollars and Sense” of Investing.

The City of Bristol’s new [2015 Plan of Development & Conservation](#) discusses Community and Cultural Resources in Chapter 6.1.4. and the need to increase the number of activities. It was also noted that many of these assets which contribute significantly to the community’s character, vitality, quality of life, and civic pride are without a base of operation – a void that the former school could fill. The Task Force agrees with this and believes that the current recommendations fulfill this goal to encourage preservation and enhancement of the city’s community cultural resources as outlined in the new Plan (p.44). The Task Force also believes the City needs to be a strong partner for this project, and that there are far-reaching [tangible and intangible economic benefits](#) to a strong arts and cultural presence.

In the fall and spring schedule of events that were produced at the Theater, the Task Force and volunteers knew, from an anecdotal basis, that there was a positive spillover effect on local businesses. Some of the research that has been done mirrors what we have seen in Bristol. For example:

- In 2012, arts and cultural production contributed more than \$698 billion to the U.S. economy, or 4.32 percent to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product, more than construction (\$586.7B) or transportation and warehousing (\$464.1B).
- 4.7 million workers were employed in the production of arts and cultural goods, receiving \$334.9 billion in compensation.
- Arts and cultural spending has a ripple effect on the overall economy, boosting both commodities and jobs. For example, for every 100 jobs created from new demand for the arts, 62 additional jobs are also created. [Click here](#) to see the complete NEA report.

We strongly believe that the MBS project could be a key catalyst for downtown development at a time when the future of the 15 acre parcel is uncertain. We do know that the costs must be calculated and opportunities realized. To determine the financial impact of arts and culture in a community, there must be a [measurement of success](#). Indicators of positive financial impact are significant production of jobs and revenue. These attractions are desirable because they draw people to a community. Arts and culture related jobs, in fact, make up a higher percentage of the U.S. workforce than any group of doctors, lawyers, or accountants. Such forms of employment indicate that the arts industry is an important part of keeping people employed and raising the attractiveness and overall investment potential of a region.

Financial alternatives, as illustrated on the [summary grid](#), were also reviewed including cost/risk to the City and private investors as well as other factors such as purpose, location, public access, and potential contributions to the community's quality of life. As noted, the conclusion, from a purely financial perspective, was that Alternative C (sell MBS to a private developer/investor) would make the most financial sense, at least in the short-run. This option minimizes short-term cost to the City, and maximizes potential revenue from the property itself generated by potential taxes and other fees.

The option that was deemed the most expensive to the City was Alternate A, for the City to retain ownership and relocate City Hall here. However, it is noted that the cost of this option could be offset substantially by the sale of current city buildings as well as cost avoidance of funds for renovations of current buildings and consolidation of services in one site.

We also reviewed a partnership approach where the city would retain ownership of the building and long-term lease the space (minus the theater) to a private developer (Alternative B) but this alternative was not viewed as substantially more beneficial than the other alternatives by the Task Force and was, therefore, removed from consideration by committee vote.

The Task Force endorses the hybrid ownership/management model similar to that used by other states and municipalities (Alternate D). In this alternative, the City retains ownership in the short-term as the building is brought up to code and occupied with revenue generating entities. As noted in other sections, an independent non-profit is created to manage the building and theater or to contract for those services while a phased approach for upgrades is implemented. After the initial phases are completed, the non-profit would "purchase" the building from the City.

Summary Point: It was the feeling of the group that Alternative D preserves the theater as the focus, and also maintains the civic/historic purpose of the building, as well as meeting the suggestions as outlined in the Planning Commission's recommendations. Phases 2, 3 and 4, described in the DRA study, will be designed and constructed as the City's need for space evolves.

Action Point: These recommendations continue to place the theater at the top of the priority list for renovations and as a catalyst for activity at this site. The ability to use and/or rent the theater space while the rest of the building is being renovated also creates revenue and maintains interest in the project.

This recommendation is a model for historic preservation that helps to safeguard the legacy of the city and its people. Five generations have graduated from here and the history of the building mirrors the history of the city. Similar to the story in Niagara Falls, many have taken pride and ownership in this as it was "their school." Many of the early volunteers know that they were helping to choose a new future for their former school and with ongoing community support, the successful events and meetings to date have become their successes as well.

Acceptance of this recommendation will **release the \$400,000 in design funds** that have been allocated by the 10-Year Capital Improvement Committee that will then allow for the solicitation of construction and bid specific renovation costs.

This initiative could be considered both an existing core asset as well as an opportunity with tremendous potential to strengthen the social, economic and cultural fabric. That does not mean that, in the future, if this primary plan becomes unfeasible that other directions or plans could not be pursued. However, at this point, we strongly recommend pursuing this recommendation based on the foundation and work that has occurred over the last year.

Sincerely,

Ellen Zoppo-Sassa

Chair, on behalf of the MBS Task Force members:

James Albert
Peter Del Mastro
David Mills
Paul Murdock
Janet Nadhazi
John Soares
Frank Stawski
Cheryl Thibeault