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City Auditorium imagined as part of public venue

Ocala manager Ricky Horst proposes complex that would preserve facade of historic building.

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A resident challenged Ocala City Manager Ricky Horst to come up with a plan to save the City Auditorium that, until recently, had a date with the wrecking ball because of its financial drain on the city's budget.

Horst has met that challenge.

He is talking about creating an outdoor entertainment and event venue that would breathe new life into an area that has long lost its luster.

The plan will not cost as much to maintain as the aging auditorium, but would maintain the historic facade while giving the area a face lift and opening it up to a variety of community uses. The plan would be done in phases in an effort not to wreak havoc with the budget during these trying economic times.



OCALA PLANNING DEPARTMENT

An artist's rendering of the planned renovations to Ocala's City Auditorium.

The City Council has approved the concept but wants to know what the project will cost and whether the community likes the idea.

Horst is proposing to demolish the back end of the auditorium and renovate the front, with its historic facade, into an open-air lobby with restrooms. The lobby would open into an attached covered pavilion with three open sides that could be used for meetings and events such as dances. Ceiling fans could be installed in the pavilion.

But Horst's vision goes beyond that. He is proposing a second phase that would add a bandstand structure west of the auditorium. It would have a parking area to unload band and other equipment that could be used for musical events or outdoor movies.

He also wants to resurface the road in front of the auditorium with structured concrete to create a pedestrian walkway or promenade that could be closed to traffic during events. The promenade could be lined with booths along the edges during events, such as art shows and the like.

Horst still has to determine the cost to implement his plan for the auditorium, which is located at the north end of Tusawilla Park northeast of downtown. Extra parking could be provided on the eastern edge of the closed city-owned trailer park or at the train station with a SunTran shuttle bus.

"This could be used for city events, community events, private events, barbecues and shows," Horst said. "There's just a lot of potential. The nice thing about this plan is it will not cost a heck of a lot more money to build. We can build it in phases so we don't have to borrow money."

There could be other possibilities as well, combined with the Discovery Science Center across the street from the auditorium.

Horst's plan emerged after some community leaders and members of the public opposed the demolition of the historic building.

Horst was caught in a conundrum. There were estimates that the auditorium would cost \$2.3 million to bring it up to code. The city would lose an estimated \$53,000 a year if the building was left

operating in its current condition.

Right now, the building is mothballed, which costs the city \$32,143 a year. The cost to demolish the building would be \$150,000.

Horst's very rough estimate of what it might cost to run the facilities, once the plan is completed, would be about \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year.

Mayor Randy Ewers formed a committee to come up with a financially viable plan for the auditorium, but no plan was forthcoming. Instead it recommended mothballing the facility until a master plan for Tuscowilla Park was completed. When he learned in October that a bid was due to demolish the building, he, once again, asked that the building be saved until a master park plan could be completed.

Although no master plan has been developed, Ewers likes Horst's proposed plan for the auditorium.

"It certainly has merit as an idea," Ewers said. "I would like to have a whole park plan, but sometimes little steps will open a vision up there as well."

Ewers said he wants to know the cost and would like to hear the public's opinion of the plan. He has not met with the auditorium committee to hear what members think about Horst's plan.

Regarding the possibility of homeless people camping in the open buildings, Ewers, who oversees the city police department, said the homeless camp all over the city.

"It should not stop us from having a nice area for recreation and outdoor activities," he said.

City Council President Kent Guinn also likes the plan but, like Ewers, wants to see the cost.

"I think it could work," Guinn said. "There's a lot of stuff that needs to be cleaned up in the area, but I think this is a good first step."

Councilman Daniel Owen, who previously said he wanted to demolish

the auditorium, could not be reached for comment on Wednesday.

Historic Ocala Preservation Society board member Pamela Stafford is pleased with the rendering.

"I think it's a wonderful idea. It's the best of both worlds," Stafford said. "I think this will satisfy a lot of folks with the desire to hang on to that building."

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