

Keefe Auditorium Commission
Thursday, January 8, 2026
City Hall, Room 208
4:30 PM

The Keefe Auditorium Commission met on the above date in Room 208 of City Hall, called to order by Chairman Dennis Schneider at 4:30pm. In attendance were Shawn Smith, Joseph Olefirowicz, Dennis Schneider, Daniel O'Donnell, and Carl Dubois. Alicia Gregg joined the meeting via remote connection (Chairman Schneider verified she was alone and could not attend in person due to other obligations). Also in attendance were Tim Cummings, Amy DeRoche, and Megan Caron. Mark McKevitz of Icon Architecture joined the meeting via remote connection.

Approval of Prior Meeting Minutes

Approval of Meeting Minutes of December 4, 2025. Motion by Carl Dubois, seconded by Joseph Olefirowicz, to accept minutes. So Voted.

Architectural Assessment and Cost Estimation

Mark McKevitz reported the architectural team is progressing on defining renovation scopes.

- Mark's team gathered original drawings from the 1930s and 1961, merging them to understand building conditions.
 - They plan to price four renovation levels: minimal, minimal plus, touring level, and preserving the east facade.
 - The building's architecture is generally sound, but accessibility to the stage is limited and requires redesign.
 - A two-hour fire separation wall is required if the theater connects to adjacent buildings, influencing construction scope and cost.
 - The engineering team will be recommending replacement of all major systems, raising complexity and cost.
 - The team is preparing narratives and sketches to accompany cost estimates for clearer communication.
 - Cost effectiveness of preserving the facade versus full demolition is under consideration.

- Asbestos and hazardous material abatement poses significant cost uncertainty due to building age and partial prior remediation.
 - Full abatement may be required beyond certain renovation thresholds, potentially increasing costs sharply.
 - The team is requesting the latest AHERA report from Shawn to refine cost allowances for abatement.
 - Early abatement estimates remain rough, and assumptions will be necessary until full assessments are done.
- The timeline targets issuance of cost estimates to the estimator in about three to four weeks, with a two-week turnaround and subsequent review period.
 - This schedule aligns with providing aldermen with informed, credible numbers within approximately eight to ten weeks.
 - Estimates will include escalation of about 10% per year to accommodate inflation and project delays.
 - The team intends to price each renovation level modularly, allowing flexible combination of options.

Operational and Business Model Considerations

The group agreed that understanding operating costs and revenue potential is essential to judge feasibility before committing to renovation.

- Operating costs are estimated around \$1 million annually, with limited potential to reduce substantially, per Pete Lawley's input.
 - Joseph emphasized the need for a simple revenue model to evaluate the gap between operating costs and expected income.
 - The business plan should focus initially on revenue streams and basic cost offsets before detailing staffing or management structures.
 - If renovation costs prove too high, further business model development may be premature.
- The facility's governance structure impacts fundraising and revenue options, with potential benefits from setting up a separate nonprofit or LLC.
 - Operating under a distinct authority, like the Manchester Airport or Performing Arts Center, can unlock revenue streams not available to city-owned assets.
 - This approach historically helped the Performing Arts Center secure \$2.6 million in new market tax credits, unlocking additional funding.
 - The model requires balancing complexity, oversight, and access to grants and donations.
- The group acknowledges the need for a vision beyond cost numbers to present to aldermen and potential donors.
 - Alicia highlighted the importance of articulating how the venue will be used and its community value to justify investment.

- Fundraising success depends on clear, compelling messaging and demonstrating quality-of-life benefits alongside economic impact.
- The team plans to seek advice from fundraising experts and stakeholders to build an effective case.

Fundraising Strategy and Stakeholder Engagement

Building a sustainable funding model will require dedicated fundraising efforts and strategic stakeholder involvement.

- There is consensus to engage local fundraising experts Rich Landon, Mary Lou Blaisdell, and Deb Navartney at the next meeting to guide strategy.
 - Meeting planned for February 5th aims to leverage their expertise on donor cultivation and capital campaign planning.
 - Early dialogue with casino developers and potential large benefactors is necessary to secure anchor funding.
 - The group recognizes New Hampshire's low philanthropic giving as a challenge requiring creative approaches.
- Smaller-scale community fundraising efforts, like a "Friends of the Keefe" group, could generate initial support and engagement.
 - This group would collect donations, encourage legacy gifts, and build grassroots momentum.
 - Formation requires city approval and proper legal structure to manage funds responsibly.
 - Timing for launching such efforts depends on project approval to avoid raising funds prematurely.
- Drawing lessons from the Performing Arts Center and Groton Hill Music Center, the plan includes building a long-term endowment and maintaining dedicated development staff.
 - The Performing Arts Center raised funds over eight years before construction and operates with a full-time development team.
 - Endowment and contributed income cover approximately 25% of operating expenses, critical to financial stability.
 - The group aims to develop a high-level pro forma reflecting these revenue mixes to present to aldermen and donors.

Project Timeline and Decision-Making Framework

A clear, realistic timeline anchored on cost estimates and fundraising is key to align stakeholders and avoid project delays.

- The architectural and engineering teams will deliver initial cost estimates within 8 to 10 weeks.
 - The group plans one more review session before sending estimates to the estimator, ensuring clarity and usability.
 - The city expects to avoid major construction or shutdowns before the end of the 2026-27 season (June 30, 2027), aligning with developer plans.
 - Any building shutdown is anticipated to last two to three years, raising urgency to finalize funding and plans.
- Operating plan and fundraising strategies must progress in parallel with cost estimation to present a cohesive case to aldermen by year-end.
 - Dennis emphasized the need to deliver a credible plan to elected leaders within this calendar year for confidence and approval.
 - Delays risk blocking housing development and complicating coordination with developers.
 - The group agreed to avoid overcommitting on timelines but remain focused on delivering actionable milestones.
- Escalation of costs at about 10% per year will be factored in to protect estimates from inflation and project delays over the next two years.
 - This approach aims to prevent surprises and ensure budget realism for long-term planning.
 - The timing of mechanical shutdowns and construction start will influence fundraising targets and cash flow needs.
 - Negotiations with developers over sequencing and building access remain pending.
- **Commitment from board members and leadership is strong, with plans to maintain engagement until the project reaches completion.**
 - Members acknowledge this project's long timeframe but remain dedicated to seeing it through.
 - Regular meetings will continue monthly, with the next scheduled for February 5th, focusing on fundraising and cost review.
 - Transparency and public record of discussions aim to keep community trust and involvement high.

Action items

- Shawn - Provide latest AHERA asbestos report to architectural team for cost estimating.
- Tim - Deliver Vectorworks 3D model of the auditorium space to architects for conversion and use in design
- Mark and Architectural Team
 - Finalize scopes across four levels of renovation options and incorporate 1930s drawings in analysis.
 - Prepare sketches, narratives, and cost estimates for submission to estimator within 3-4 weeks.
- Dennis
 - Engage with Rich Landon to discuss fundraising strategies and planning.
 - Organize next meeting on February 5 with external experts (Rich Landon, Mary Lou Blaisdell, Deb Navartney) invited for consultation.

Commission

- Develop a preliminary operating revenue model skeleton to assess feasibility based on known utilization and costs.
- Coordinate and review architectural cost estimate projections once available, including inflation escalation assumptions.

Next Commission Meeting

The next regular meeting is scheduled for February 5, 2026 at 4:30 PM, Room 208 at City Hall.

Adjournment

Daniel O'Donnell motioned, seconded by Shawn Smith, to adjourn the meeting. So voted at 6:00pm.

Respectfully submitted – Shawn M. Smith, Commission Secretary