

Keefe Auditorium Commission

Thursday, March 19, 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 4:39pm. In attendance were Shawn Smith, 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, Liz Hannum, Mark McKevez of Icon Architecture, and Marylou Blaisdell (associated with Nashua's Performing Arts Center). Joe Mobelic and Ned Collier from the architectural team also joined the meeting via remote connection.

Approval of Prior Meeting Minutes

Approval of Meeting Minutes of January 8, 2026. Motion by Dan O'Donnell, seconded by Carl Dubois, to accept minutes. So voted by roll call.

Fundraising Experience and Strategy

Marylou reported the fundraising effort for the Performing Arts Center (PAC) involved raising \$4.4 million before city approval and included hiring consultants costing about \$200,000 in total.

- The fundraising group, Nashua Community Arts, operated as a 501©(3) nonprofit separate from the city to maintain donor privacy and flexibility. There were three consultant phases, each costing about \$25,000.
- Consultants conducted feasibility studies and outreach in multiple phases, guiding the approach but without contingent fees on funds raised.
- The committee focused on major donors, with all members making personal contributions and enabling five-year pledges which accounted for about 80% of donations, with very few pledge drop-offs.
- Fundraising faced challenges including political hurdles, the need for high-level commitment, and the difficulty of sustaining momentum over multiple years, especially amid external events like COVID-19.

Performing Arts Center Operations and Financial Structure

The Nashua Center for the Arts operates under a city-owned building managed by a board of trustees and Spectacle, which handles marketing and events, with private funds supplementing operational needs.

- The city financed roughly \$21 million for construction and acquisition, covering debt service separately from operational revenues.
- Nashua Community Arts raises at least \$25,000 annually, including contributions to a capital maintenance fund, with additional funds raised for enhancements like a \$60,000 piano.
- Spectacle runs the center profitably, but utility costs, especially heating due to HVAC design limitations, have been higher than expected. Spectacle has a special rate for non-profit organizations.
- Donor recognition included naming rights for seats and spaces, with some success in selling about 300 out of 750 named seats, contributing to fundraising.
- Lesson Learned – Have a committed finance committee with a strong chairman and members who aren't afraid to ask for money.
- Question as to whether the City can support two performing arts centers. Marylou thinks not.

Community and Market Context

The project's success depended heavily on community segments, with younger, more recently arrived donors contributing more significantly than long-standing residents.

- The downtown location was a strategic choice to integrate dining and entertainment but posed parking challenges that need further consideration.
- Community groups like symphony and theater companies require affordable rental rates, which complicates balancing community access with commercial viability.
- Comparisons to other regional venues like The Palace in Manchester highlighted the importance of location, parking, and scale in long-term success.
- Political dynamics influenced funding requirements, notably a \$4 million private fundraising condition inserted by an alderman, which almost stalled the project but was ultimately met.

Renovation and Technical Requirements

Mark McKevitz reported renovation of the Keefe building will require extensive upgrades to mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and fire safety systems, with the need to fully separate the former school and theater services.

- The project qualifies as a Level 3 alteration, triggering structural reinforcements, seismic upgrades, full accessibility compliance, and energy code commissioning.
- Pursuing historic building status could reduce some energy code burdens but adds complexity and potential costs; this status has not yet been pursued by the city.
- HVAC systems will need rooftop units with new ductwork; plumbing must be separated for fire suppression and domestic use.
- Electrical upgrades include a new transformer and panel; fire alarm improvements mostly focus on new panels and associated equipment.

Renovation Options and Theater Enhancements

Three renovation options were presented, ranging from minimal upgrades to a new theater addition, each improving accessibility and technical capabilities progressively.

- **Option 1 (Minimal)** focuses on essential system separations, new restrooms, and basic mechanical upgrades with no significant auditorium changes.
- **Option 2 (Small Addition)** adds lobby and restroom space, improves accessibility in orchestra seating areas, and includes modest theater upgrades like acoustic curtains and lighting control enhancements.
- **Option 3 (New Theater Addition)** proposes a 66,000 sq ft expansion with a larger lobby, elevator access, improved loading, and theatrical features such as a crossover corridor, orchestra lift, enhanced rigging, and new lighting catwalks.
- Joseph from the theater perspective emphasized that Option 3 meets touring production standards with modern equipment expected by performers and operators, while options 1 and 2 address only basic improvements.

Project Planning and Next Steps

The commission agreed not to rush estimations on the full scope, acknowledging financial realities and the need to prioritize feasible improvements.

- There is consensus that Option 3, while ideal, is likely unaffordable in a single phase, requiring phased or scaled-back approaches.
- The project requires clear agreement on starting points and priorities before detailed cost estimating.
- The commission plans to reconvene in about two weeks to review updated information and refine project scope accordingly.
- Sharing detailed plans and drawings among stakeholders will support informed decision-making and enable better cost projections.

Action Items

Architects:

- Share presentation materials and drawings with the commission for review and record keeping.
- Coordinate and provide cost estimation input from Harvey based on current option outlines after commission finalizes scope decisions.

Commission Members:

- Review renovation options and provide feedback on desired scope and changes to be incorporated into cost estimates.

- Participate actively in finance efforts if fundraising resumes, ensuring a strong committed committee with capable fundraisers is established, involving commissioners as needed.

Marylou Blaisdell

- Offer insights and historical knowledge on fundraising efforts and structure to the commission as needed.

Unassigned

- Verify status and possibility of historic designation for the Keefe Auditorium to identify energy code implications.
- Investigate and clarify parking availability and city infrastructure near Keefe Auditorium and proposed additions to assess operational challenges.

Next Commission Meeting(s)

The next Auditorium Commission Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 2, 2026 at 4:30 PM.

Adjournment

Motion to adjourn by Shawn Smith, seconded by Carl Dubois. Meeting adjourned at 6:03 PM.

Respectfully submitted – Shawn M. Smith, Commission Secretary