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VALLEJO COUNCIL APPROVES PLAN FOR INTERIM PERFORMING ARTS CENTER IN DOWNTOWN VALLEJO

VALLEJO – The Vallejo City Council, after hearing a feasibility study on the Empress Theater, approved preliminary plans that could make the 90-year-old site an interim Performing Arts Center in downtown Vallejo.

Consultant Gary Meyer of Ideas prepared and presented the feasibility study, which showed the Empress could be renovated and used for numerous activities related to arts and entertainment. The major finding of the feasibility study was that the Empress is suitable as an interim performing arts center and will help fill an existing deficit in available performance and mixed-use space in Vallejo.

One council member felt the idea of an interim facility wasn't enough.

"We might want to consider making the Empress a permanent performing arts center," Vice Mayor Gary Cloutier said following Meyer's presentation. "Other cities that have built new centers have lost their shirts."

One of Meyer's suggestions calls for removal of seats from the ground floor of the theater and instead making two or three levels of seating that can be configured in a number of ways.

"The balcony would remain the same, with stadium seating, but the new configuration would allow you to have cabaret-type performances," Meyer told the council. "Then there's theater in the round, or you could curtain off the balcony for a smaller venue. You could hold banquets, make presentations, conferences, conventions ... there are so many things that are possible. Just think outside the box and whatever you think might happen can happen."

The Empress was opened in 1912 with over 900 seats and has gone through five different name changes. Fire nearly destroyed the theater in 1931, but it was rebuilt. It was then renovated in 1951, but closed in 1962. It wasn't until the 1980s that Bill Elliott purchased the theater and reopened it as the Empress, showing movies. The Loma Prieta Earthquake in 1989 shut down the Empress again. The theater changed hands one more time before Robert Litwin purchased it, along with the Vallejo Hotel, in 2002.

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Since then Litwin has renovated both the Vallejo Hotel and the Empress. In March an event was held to kick off downtown Vallejo's effort to form an Arts and Entertainment District in the area. The Empress Hotel is located in the 300 block of Virginia Street.

"Saving the Empress is really important," Council member Joanne Schivley said. "This is the last remaining theater of about a half dozen that used to be in the downtown area. It was one of the first here, it's the last remaining and it is going to have a future. So many people want this. I have rarely seen this much community support for a project."

Along with moving forward with utilizing the Empress as a performing arts center, Mayor Tony Intintoli asked staff to look into the possibility of acquiring a portable stage. Vacaville purchased a portable stage at a cost of over \$100,000. The stage includes sound and lighting equipment and can be taken almost anywhere.

Cost estimates range from \$1.16 million to \$1.9 million for renovation of the essentials of the Empress, including seismic retrofit, heating and air conditioning, stage dressing room and other improvements.