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Tenants Must Vacate Memorial Auditorium by Year's End

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242 Main at Memorial Auditorium

MOLLY WALSH

Memorial Auditorium tenants must leave by the end of the year because structural problems threaten to make the building unsafe.

Burlington's 242 Main youth center and concert venue, the Burlington City Arts clay and print studios and the Generator maker space all must move. Burlington city engineer Norm Baldwin has concluded that the 1927 red brick auditorium on Main Street needs major work.

"The city engineer is not comfortable with the building remaining in use beyond the end of the year," Mayor Miro Weinberger told *Seven Days*.

The future of Memorial Auditorium and several adjoining parcels that form what is known as the Gateway Block has been discussed for years. The building's mounting problems have increased pressure to make decisions about the parcel. Last fall city officials stopped booking concerts and events in the main part of the auditorium.

It would cost \$4 million just to stabilize the building, which has long been underutilized.

Weinberger has been in talks with University of Vermont officials about a sports arena and conference center on the site since last year, and says the talks remain active.

"I think it is a potentially exciting opportunity for the city and UVM. I think we've done enough work to establish that physically a facility that serves UVM's needs could fit on the site," Weinberger said.

The talks are conceptual but "have gotten more serious and both parties remain interested," Weinberger said.

South Burlington city officials are also exploring an arena partnership with UVM as part of the suburb's proposed downtown development. A feasibility study on a \$60 million 5,000-seat arena is expected to be complete next month.

"It's nice to be wanted," joked Tom Gustafson, vice president for university relations and administration at UVM.

UVM has made no decisions and proposals are still in early stages. "We're talking to both municipalities at this point," Gustafson said. "I think things are really still in the formative stages in terms of how both of these might shape up."

Memorial Auditorium would likely have to be torn down entirely or partially for an arena project. The discussions include the two privately owned parcels to the west of the auditorium and the city parking lot at Main and South Winooski streets.

The mayor hopes to issue a request for proposals on Memorial and the Gateway Block next winter.

Meanwhile, the Burlington City Arts studios will move to leased space at 405 Pine Street. Generator is moving to a warehouse on Sears Lane in the South End.

It's unclear where 242 Main will go. Non-musical programming might shift to Fletcher Free Library and concerts would take place at various venues. The final decision has not been made and the city plans to assemble a group of teens and ask them what they want in a teen center, said Jesse Bridges, director of Burlington Parks, Recreation & Waterfront, which oversees Memorial Auditorium.

"The concept is that the kids have some power and say in what occurs," Bridges said.

In the meantime, city workers are erecting wooden overhangs at doors on the south side of Memorial Auditorium. They're intended to protect people in the event bricks come loose while workers do relatively minor fixes on the building this summer.



Burlington's Memorial Auditorium | MOLLY WALSH

Tags: Memorial Auditorium, University of Vermont, 242 Main, Burlington City Arts, Generator, Image

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