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Questions remain over wisdom of Shubert move

Reclamation of the Shubert Theater will launch after more than a decade of controversy and fundraising and \$38 million.

By **NEAL ST. ANTHONY**, Star Tribune

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It was, arguably, a bad decision by the Minneapolis City Council to move the dilapidated Shubert Theater from then-dormant Block E to 5th Street and Hennepin Avenue.

A couple of key city staffers had advised demolition. But the preservationists prevailed so there it sits. This week, the council voted to spend another \$2 million in federal funds to finally get the renovation underway. All told, it's taken a decade and \$38 million, including \$20 million in private donations.

"I'll admit, I've had mixed feelings at times," said Will Law, chief operating officer of Artspace, the Minneapolis-based developer that took on the Shubert several years ago. "There have been pitfalls."

The feds said the Shubert qualifies as a job-producing, economic development project.

Construction will get underway in August.

"I have 14 stalled projects on the books," said Mike Christenson, executive director of the Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development Department. "This is the one that's closest to being shovel-ready. And we know that building for the arts, whether on East Franklin Avenue or East Lake Street, these 'culture corridors,' lead to economic development."

There might be a few homeowners in Minneapolis neighborhoods ravaged by the mortgage-fraud scandal who would rather the city use federal stimulus money to tear down neighborhood eyesores or enhance promising new-homeowner initiatives. Those types of investment are covered by different programs and they are proceeding, Christensen said.

Meanwhile, restoration of the Shubert will create 150-plus construction and permanent jobs, bring tens of thousands of dance patrons downtown, complete the performing-arts vision for the successful Hennepin theater district and alleviate a loitering and crime problem that has moved from busy Block E to the lonely stretch of the avenue on which sit the Shubert and the Hennepin Center for the Performing Arts. At least that's the official pitch.

The cops and the new urbanists say having people on the street trumps crime. The arts crowds frequent local bistros and they don't

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make trouble.

Colin Hamilton, CEO of the Minnesota Shubert Performing Arts and Education Center, said the Shubert will be a magnificent hub for up to three dozen dance and related troupes who are now limited to using other spaces that top out at 250 seats.

"We want to do for dance in this community what the Guthrie has done for theater over the last 40 years," Hamilton said. "There will be a big education component as well as a performance component. We had eight private donors of \$1 million or more. There has never been anything comparable for dance in Minnesota."

I would have preferred to see that \$2 million come from private donations. But then again, state taxpayers will spend about \$400 million in principal and interest on the new TCF Bank football stadium for the Gophers. So, who's counting?

CEO Louis King of Summit Academy OIC on the North Side, which trains dozens of young minority folks for good-paying jobs in the construction trades, is near agreement with McGough Construction and the city. Up to one-third of the workers on the Shubert project will be women, minority apprentices and skilled minority craftsmen. The jobs will pay \$18.50 to \$40 an hour for months. That's a good thing.

King, a former Army tank commander, struck a similar deal with Mortensen Construction on the Twins stadium. And minorities made up 25 percent of the workers on the stunning renovation of the Sears Roebuck complex on E. Lake Street into a new headquarters for Allina Hospitals and the Midtown Global Market.

Unemployment among young black male adults is estimated at three times that of whites, King said. And King's construction-training program is producing new futures for trainees who are renovating old houses, weatherizing buildings and making a decent living.

"Philanthropy doesn't get these people out of poverty," King said. "Training and jobs do. We're about transparency and the bottom line."

We're locked and loaded for Operation Shubert.

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