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Playhouse Replacement

It will be a hard decision: what is the future of the Highlands Playhouse building? First, some background.

The Highlands Playhouse has been a fixture in the town for a long time. Originally built as the auditorium for the Highlands School in 1931, in the late 1930s, the Highlands Little Theater used the building for summer productions. In 1952, the building was acquired by the Town of Highlands, and in 1972, the theater company acquired 501(c)(3) tax exemption status and then became known as Highlands Community Theatre.

There have been a lot of great performances in that building, and many grand memories have been created. But time has not been kind to the building, and it is in a very poor state of repair. It's been vacant now for well over a year.

At the town retreat in March, Mosley Architects presented a structural assessment, which was not encouraging, to say the very least. To bring the facility to code and remodel it into a new, usable, and safe space would be expensive. Shannon Calloway of Mosley Architects gave a preliminary estimate of about \$2.6 to renovate the playhouse but qualified this initial assessment by stating that a deeper dive into the building's condition might even drive the costs up more. Since then, I have talked with knowledgeable people who say the costs could eventually be 3 to 4 million dollars. The cost estimates do not include any additional upgrades or functional changes. Basically, it would be a teardown and rebuild it from the foundation on up. Any historical preservation would pretty much be lost.

Keeping in mind all the good service the facility has provided, and when thinking of rebuilding or remodeling, and beyond the cost, two issues must be considered: parking and land use. First, parking has always been an issue; few spaces are directly available at the facility. Second, deed restrictions on the land use prevents the building from being sold or leased to for-profit organizations. This limits the types of uses for the space.

Regrettably, I think there are other capital investments that the town could make that would have a broader impact on the community. For instance, the proposed playground at the Highlands Recreation Center and a new after-school and summer

program building are in need of funding. Supporting and providing childcare is a critical, and such facilities would be key components in an overall childcare plan.

Another question is what would be the purpose of the restored building? Highlands has a wonderful new Performing Art Center where the Mountain Theater Company performs. Is there a need to gain do plays and lectures at the Highlands Playhouse? If the community wants to raise funds for more performance and lecture space, I suggest building a black box or small theater for these activities at PAC. The original PAC design called for such a small theater.

If the playhouse were restored, who would maintain and operate it? Probably the town. The restoration costs are just one initial commitment to such a project; there would be sizable, ongoing maintenance and staffing expenditures. And I don't see how the town could justify providing free space to community organizations. Hefty rental fees would have to be in place just to cover some of the operating costs.

Some folks have suggested the town could use a restored building as a government annex with offices and a counsel auditorium. For the costs of restoring the playhouse, the town could easily build a future addition to the current town hall with a large public meeting room and offices in a seamlessly connected facility.

I have heard ideas for simply adding more parking and making the area a sitting or picnic area. The comprehensive plan calls for such facilities. As of today, I believe our current downtown parking situation is acceptable, and the Kelsey-Hutchinson Founders Park does provide an excellent area for picnickers.

One idea I recently heard was to create a new event space. The idea is to have a large open area for events and casual sitting and eating spaces, with a covered, retractable roofing system similar to the swimming pool. Such a pavilion could provide that weather-proof area for events, which in our rainforest environment has a tendency to "rain on our parade," as they say. Additionally, it is thought that the area sits on high ground that could provide for underground parking. I believe the idea has merit, as it could be an extension of the Highlands Park and Recreation Department and thus enable its use as a rentable facility to community groups. Such a development, while expensive would complement the existing Veterans Memorial Park in front of the police station, the new renovations across the street as well as the new ABC store.

In the coming months, the town board, after public input and further professional exploration, will have to make a challenging decision concerning the future of the property. I know more ideas will come forward.