

# Turtle building supporters seeking options as demolition looms

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*Alex Simone*

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*WBFO / NPR*

With the demolition of The Turtle convention center in Niagara Falls closer than ever, supporters are still scrambling for ways to preserve the building and its legacy.

“Keep bringing it up, keep posting about it on social media.”

That’s what Niagara Falls High School senior Emma Santos had to say about continuing efforts to save the building.

She’s one of several students who advocated for The Turtle’s preservation via historic landmarking during a February city council meeting, which the council voted against.

A member of the Cayuga Nation, Santos says the bleak outlook doesn’t mean efforts should falter.

“And I feel like, if we like widespread it, and have like other people join in on doing that, then like the developers will see, like, okay, like people care about this, and maybe somewhere in their heart they'll save it.”

Shaun Wilson of Native American Community Services, or NACS, hopes to find a solution that can maintain the building while also being agreeable for the current owners, but discussions have been difficult since there's little contact between the two sides.

Buying the building outright is likely too expensive, but hopefully, there's room for a different solution, said Wilson, the president for NACS board of directors.

“Our end game is basically to reopen it to a thriving cultural center. You know, just think of the 9 million visitors a year that come through Niagara Falls, and the cultural experience that the visitors can have, while they're here,” he said. “You know, The Turtle — with an indigenous background there — would just be really fulfilling culturally, to anybody coming through the region. So that's, that's the hope, is to somehow save that building.”

Niagara Falls Redevelopment, who owns the property, declined an interview request but provided a copy of its letter to the city council from February.

NFR says in the letter it would be open to negotiations, but no financially viable option was presented from the Native American population.

Preservation is important because it considers what the space means for generations who had the opportunity to visit, said

Niagara Falls Senior Amelia Jacob, who is Cayugan and Mohawk.

“It's the idea of something that was so like, important for other natives, growing up when it was alive,” she said. “Keeping that around just as like, 'hey, this existed.' I feel like that's important, and not doing that is not enough recognition, like it's just, kind of, destroying and taking away those memories from people.”

Getting the building open again wouldn't solve any issues in one move, but it would help preserve native culture and remember past generations, Oneida Nation member Jeff Hill said.

“They've taken enough, it's time to just let us do what we got to do and let us fix our fix our communities ... This building is a small, small piece, but it does help bring back some of those that are lost,” he said. “It gives us a place to hang out. It gives us some place to go, and honestly, it gives some place so that the history, again, history is huge, and a lot of people here don't understand the history that they walk around.”

Even some non-indigenous members of the community remember the impact of visiting The Turtle as children. Local resident Saladin Allah says attending concerts at The Turtle was important because it was a new experience growing up.

“At The Turtle, they literally brought hip-hop artists in there, and it was one of the first times community members like me had an opportunity to actually see a live hip-hop show,” he said. “That connection, in terms of our community, is something that many people in my community have the most fondest memories about.”

But the clock keeps ticking on whether that history can be preserved, leaving supporters to search for answers.