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By:

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East Lansing's City Council voted unanimously last night to appoint a special committee to consider how to better utilize the Hannah Community Center, including its currently-vacant third floor.

Council Member Shanna Draheim pushed for the idea, recognizing that the Center is a beloved but potentially underutilized resource that is costing the City about a million dollars a year [2].

The resolution [3] passed by Council last night on the consent agenda organizes a study committee comprised of eleven people including seven members total from the Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission, the Planning Commission, the Senior Commission, and the Arts Commission, plus four at-large members "with professional experience in construction, architecture, real estate development, event planning, facility management," or other relevant fields.

Those representing particular commissions will be appointed by their commissions. The resolution doesn't explain how the "at large" members are chosen. It does indicate that the committee members need not be residents of East Lansing.

The committee will be called the "Planning for Hannah Community Center's Future" committee. Its charge includes holding public meetings, gathering information, and reporting on:

1. The current use and financial position of Hannah Community Center.
2. National trends in community center use and recreation options.
3. Community interests and expectations regarding the Center.
4. Options for improving the physical and technological features of the Center.
5. Ways to market the Center better.

Council discussed the matter in some depth at its December 11 "discussion-only" meeting. At that meeting, Draheim emphasized that "we are not talking about closing Hannah Community Center."

She said the resolution was meant for "just looking at the physical space and what else we might do there."

Hannah Community Center was originally a school within ELPS and was reopened as a community center after East Lansing voters approved a \$7 million bond to repurpose the building in 1998.

The third floor was never completed because expenses ran higher than expected and the bond did not cover the cost of renovating the third floor, as had been hoped. The Center has been operating at a significant loss ever since, with expenses currently outpacing revenues by over a million dollars a year.

One point in convening the committee is to look at whether revenues might be increased by offering more attractive options.

Meadows suggested at the December 11 meeting that the committee could start off by holding meetings with the East Lansing community, then start to meet on their own.

He added that a primary reason the income tax was passed was the community's fondness for the Hannah Community Center. Council had talked about potentially closing the Center if the tax did not pass.

"There's a lot of reasons why we were able to get the income tax passed," Meadows said. "But one of the primary reasons, I think, was the fact that people did not want to lose their community center."

Draheim suggested that the committee think creatively, for example, by adding a specific indoor play area for children, possibly on the third floor.

The resolution calls for the committee to hold its first meeting by January 15, 2019, and to report to City Council no later than September 1, 2019.

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