

NEWS *from Middletown, Pa.*

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Theatre group expresses interest in long-term lease of Middletown's historic Elks Building

Picture the Elks Theater in Middletown as a community performing arts center. Imagine a renovated interior, with the historical character preserved, but modern amenities like updated electrical system and new restrooms. Visualize an extended stage, filled with dramatic and musical theater, dance, musical concerts, and comedy shows. A retractable screen would allow the theater to still be used for movies.

Out front in the Elks Building, the retail spaces along Union Street might be filled with an art gallery, a café, and perhaps class space for acting and dance lessons.

That is the vision of Wendi Dobson and the Phantom Theatre Company (PTC), a Harrisburg area not for profit theater group which has proposed leasing and renovating the Elks Building for just such use.

"We'd like to use it for all kinds of different events. There is just so much that could be done," says Dobson.

"It's an exciting idea," says Matt Tunnell, chairman of the Middletown Industrial and Commercial Redevelopment Authority (ICDA), which recently took ownership of the historic downtown anchor building.

The ICDA has agreed to a non-binding letter of intent with PTC in hopes of negotiating a long term lease agreement.

"We have said from the start, the ICDA's plan in purchasing the building is to see this historic anchor building of Middletown's downtown restored and turned into a vibrant part of the downtown's rebirth," Tunnell says. "A group like Phantom Theatre Company could really help make that vision a reality."

"I'm very excited about this project. I see the Elks as becoming the cultural hub of Middletown," says Philip J. Dobson, who plans to assist his wife's theater group in renovating the building. "It is a good opportunity for the theater group because of what is going on in the downtown in Middletown."

Wendi Dobson cites the Borough's downtown streetscape project, set to get underway next year, as one of the reasons she'd like to include a café in the group's concept for the building.

“We envision having a café with internet access and outdoor sidewalk, someplace that would draw Penn State students, local residents and visitors from out of town. Since the intersection of Union and Emaus streets will be so nice, it would be an ideal place for a sidewalk café,” Wendi Dobson says.

Philip Dobson is a Harrisburg area real estate developer who recently renovated an old Catholic elementary school on Cameron Street in Harrisburg, turning it into the River City Blues Club and Dart Room, a live music venue with what has been called a “world class darts facility.”

In renovating the building, which had been used as a print shop and a roofing supply company since the school had closed, Philip Dobson looked to incorporate as many of the historical features of the old school as he could, even restoring old blackboards in the building.

“I am very conscious of historic preservation,” says Dobson, whose offices are located in the Cameron Mansion on Front Street in Harrisburg, another historic building he restored. “You have to marry the historic and the modern. Restore and preserve what you can, but you have to have modern electric, air conditioning, bathrooms, and such.”

Having agreed to the letter of intent, Tunnell says the next step will be for representatives of the ICDA to meet with Phantom Theatre Company to begin discussions on the terms and conditions of a lease agreement.