

Hidden Aspects Of Day-Care Plan Demand Scrutiny

It is proper that we take a second look at an idea we embraced a week ago.

On Dec. 28, we endorsed a proposal to convert the basement of Burlington's Memorial Auditorium

into a day-care center for children and a drop-in center for the elderly. Not only did the plan seem to have merit

but we suggested that opposition from the Finance Board was because its members "seemed to be more concerned with trivialities than with solving the auditorium's fiscal problems" — and we noted, the auditorium sat vacant most of the year while draining away \$58,000 in city revenues.

Now, however, we believe our criticism of the Finance Board was unfair and our endorsement of the scheme premature.

What we endorsed was a Sanders' administration proposal to rent the basement to the Ethan Allen Child Care Center and the Visiting Nurses Association.

Since then we have learned that the city would not be renting to either organization. Instead, the plan calls for the city to rent the basement to the Memorial Auditorium Conversion Committee, a private group with no official status, which would then rent space to the day-care center and the Visiting Nurses Association.

In a proposal to city officials, Jane Driscoll, the mayor's youth coordinator and a member of the conversion committee, said the basement would become a community center that would be supported by a first-year budget in excess of \$45,000. Where that money would come from is not explained in the proposal although the private group is seeking funding from the city's Community Development Funds. Those funds come from the federal government but because of delays funds due in October may not be available before June. Even now the city doesn't know how much it will receive although the figure is estimated between \$700,000 and \$850,000.

Although designating a portion of the funds for a community center might be a proper thing to do, the money could go to other needs considered more important by the Board of Aldermen. Already, we're told, the city has requests for funds in excess of \$950,000. In the face of reduced federal funding to the city and social agencies, the money might be put to better use elsewhere.

Then, too, the conversion committee would hire a full-time employee to manage the basement. But on the drawing boards already is a plan for the city to hire a manager to run both floors of the facility. Does the city really want two managers for a facility that presently has none?

That raises questions, too, about the relationship of the conversion committee with the city. According to Ms. Driscoll's proposal, the basement manager — and other employees hired by the committee — would be responsible to the committee's board of directors. Therefore, we assume, they would not be city employees. And only 20 percent of revenue generated by renting the facility would find its way into the city's general fund. The rest of the money, according to Ms. Driscoll's proposal, will "go back into programming" after 10 percent is deducted for the manager as "commission on bookings." (The commission is in addition to a salary.)

That's fine if the city desires to put the basement in the hands of an independent organization over which it would have little control. There may be, however, a better way of accomplishing many of the goals established by the conversion committee without the city leasing out the facility.

The city's Department of Parks and Recreation might be the agency responsible for managing both floors of the auditorium. That would eliminate the need for separate managers — a manager hired by the Department would be in charge of the entire building — and would keep revenue from rentals in the city coffers where it belongs.

Another reason for keeping the auditorium under city management is to avoid conflicts over use of the basement and the floor above. One thing Ms. Driscoll hopes to do is provide "full-time day-care and night (second shift) care" which suggests there could be problems when youngsters trying to sleep are disturbed by noise from above.

In no way are we suggesting the plan offered by Ms. Driscoll is entirely without merit. Nor are we saying it's a bad idea to rent space to Ethan Allen Child Care Center and the Visiting Nurses Association. If the day-care center wants to offer night and weekend care, we say let them do so but that should be considered when the rental fee is established. Nevertheless, management of the basement should remain with the city unless it opts to rent the entire facility to an independent agency that would pay a fat fee to the city.

And that agency should expect to pay rent when it occupies the building. Although the conversion committee offers paying \$1,200 per month rent for the lower level, the fee, according to Ms. Driscoll's proposal, would be waived "for the first six months until we get settled in."

So, in addition to asking the city for \$45,000 to put it in business, the private organization is asking for a free ride for six months. If, after six months, it believes it needs additional time to "get settled in," we assume the organization might ask that the rent-free arrangement be continued. If that happens, and if the Board of Aldermen says no and declares the organization in violation of its lease, one can imagine the furor when the center has to close.

Frankly, we view this proposal as coming dangerously close to putting the city in the day-care business. That may be fine but the city ought to go into such an arrangement with its eyes open and with approval of the voters. And if the city is going to subsidize a private day-care program, we wonder whether the center ought to be open to non-residents. Not all families served by Ethan Allen Day Care Center reside in Burlington. Why should Burlington residents subsidize the care of youngsters who do not live in the city? Shouldn't those communities also contribute to the funding of the center? And, if such a program is needed, why can't the city run its own program independent of any outside organization?

These are just a few of the questions we asked after reading Ms. Driscoll's proposal. Unfortunately, the proposal isn't as simple as we made it sound on Dec. 28. In not moving quickly to approve the plan, the Finance Board may have had the best interests of the city at heart. That's something we thought you ought to know.



Editorial