

Northampton's arts imperative

By ROB WEIR

NORTHAMPTON — I grew up in a Pennsylvania town about the size of Northampton. It was a regional magnet where people came to shop, attend movies, dance in clubs and see stage shows. Buses that stopped on the square linked the town core to outlying districts, including a prep school and women's college.

Then one of the theaters closed, was razed and replaced by a parking lot. The second movie house stopped showing first-run features and descended into shabbiness. In quick order the teen club and prep school closed, the buses stopped running, the college began to struggle and downtown businesses fled to a generic suburban mall.

A lot of the boarded storefronts were purchased for a song by an out-of-town "developer" looking to generate easy dough without sinking much money into the properties. Soon, Main Street was filled with transients, check-cashing dives and thrift stores. It seemed as if everything fell apart at the wink of an eye.

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During the past Christmas season, there were days in which there were more beggars than shoppers on Main Street. When my wife and I moved to Northampton in 1985, the Sullivan School had three floors of retail activity and one didn't even consider traveling to Hadley's "dead mall" to buy a pair of jeans, hardware, a camera or stationery, nor did one have to stray far more than a block to get fresh fish, an elegant brunch, or sweat up a dance floor. Three ven-

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ues showed movies every night of the week, the Northampton Center for the Arts was flush with optimism as it entered its second year of existence and there were so many concerts that venues tried to coordinate schedules.

Later came a dynamic film festival series and, in 2000, our little slice of the Commonwealth was voted the top small arts city in the nation.

Would we even rank a mention today? There are no moviehouses, the film fest is (nearly) dead, Taste of Northampton is gone, the Academy of Music and the Calvin are dark most nights and the Center for the Arts is soon to be homeless. City Hall makes the right noises about the importance of the arts, but there just never seems to be any money to support them. Everybody is scrambling to save schools, police jobs, the fire department, road repairs or (fill in your favorite blank).

I feel like Yogi Berra when he said, "It's déjà vu all over again." If we're smart, pumping money into the arts will be Northampton's priority No. 1, even if it means cuts to other city services. The arts are not a luxury; they are the economic driver of our city — the very thing that fills parking meters, restaurants, stores and tax coffers. Look it up; American arts and cultural organizations generate \$30 billion of spin-off revenue

each year. A lot more of that used to come our way.

Enough with making the art beg beneath the budget table. Northampton government needs to act quickly and boldly, not launch long-term feasibility studies. Step one should be a new arts center to house a three-screen theater, the Center for the Arts, performance spaces and workshops.

A logical site exists: the old Honda dealership on King Street. It is walkable to downtown, has ample parking and ties in nicely to the Hotel Northampton (a real gem, as opposed to the idiotic idea of a hotel behind Pulaski Park).

The city should arrange either to pay a nominal sum for the property or seize it by eminent domain. Recruit volunteers to help renovate the site, offer tax breaks to contractors willing to discount work and materials, launch a capital drive and fund it however else is necessary.

The city managed to find money for a new middle school, a fire hall and a police station, so let's act now lest we wake up in the not-so-distant future and wonder how everything went wrong so fast.

Consider this quote: "I have seen the critical role that the arts play in stimulating creativity and in developing vital communities.

... The arts have a crucial impact on our economy and are an important catalyst for learning, discovery and achievement in our country."

That's not from some romantic poet; it's from Microsoft's Paul Allen, who knows that the arts generate capital.

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