

FINAL REPORT
OF THE
FLATIRON REUSE COMMITTEE

October 2008

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- Responses to Questionnaire at Public Meeting, October 13, 2007
- Various memos, letters and e-mails on the reuse of the Flatiron

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- Review of the Existing CONY High School Auditorium, January 28, 2008, Eric Stark, Assistant Professor of Architecture, University of Maine at Augusta
- Flatiron Highlights, Augusta Comprehensive Plan 2007
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- LD262 An Act To Amend the Credit for Rehabilitation of Historic Properties- Highlights
- Proposed Restoration Program & Opinion of Probable Construction Cost, September 1998, Sylvanus Doughty

Please Note: Available for separate review are plans for Major Development Approval, Volumes 1 & 2 which were submitted by Hannaford to the Augusta Planning Board in October, 2005 with revisions submitted March, 2006. Final approval was made by the Planning Board in July, 2006. During November, 2007, Hannaford representatives received approval for plans that would allow the Hannaford part of the project to be LEED certified (US Green Building Council's **Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design** – Green Building Rating System).

Appendix E**Maintenance Costs & Upgrades**

- Memorandum, November 16, 2006, Maintenance & Upgrade Costs for Cony and Flatiron
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FLATIRON REPORT

When the last Cony students walked out of the Flatiron Building in June of 2006, they left behind seventy-six years of precious high school memories along with the rich heritage and pride of an entire City. This heritage will not be forgotten and should be preserved in a rejuvenated structure that will serve Augusta area residents for another seventy-six years to come.

History. The Flatiron Building, as it is referred to, is a three-story wedge shaped building that was built between 1926 and 1932. It was used as a high school, together with a 1964 addition, until it was turned over to the city by the school department after the opening of the new high school. The building is currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. See Appendix A - History. There is a significant level of historic, architectural and emotional interest and value associated with the building.

The Committee and its Process. The Augusta City Council, at its July 13, 2006 meeting, authorized the appointment of a Flatiron Reuse Committee “to study the potential for future usage of the Cony Flatiron Building.”

The City Council further ordered, “That the charge of the Flatiron Reuse Committee shall include:

- To **assess the current condition**, including the status of the utility systems, of the building and related property;”
- To **recommend a budget of expenditures** to City Council for City funded improvements to the property necessary to enhance its attractiveness to prospective occupants;”
- To **study all related considerations**, including neighborhood compatibility and parking, and make appropriate recommendations to City Council as to the **highest and best use of the property.**”

A representative cross-section of eight Augusta residents were appointed to the Committee by then Mayor William Dowling. In the eighteen months since its first meeting on September 7, 2006, the Committee worked diligently and held over fifteen public meetings including three well-advertised forums to elicit and organize public input. The Committee continually reflected on its mission, goals and direction. Large amounts of data were presented to the Committee for its consideration. See generally, Appendix B – Public Feedback; Appendix C – News, Notices, Mailings; and Appendix D – Other Studies & Law.

Given the professional nature and volume of work at hand, the Committee’s first task was to hire a consultant to assess the architectural, structural and market aspects of the Flatiron. The consultant would also be charged with gathering as much public input and opinion as possible. During the fall of 2006, Requests for Qualifications and Requests for Proposals were issued. Five consultants were interviewed; the firm of Barba + Wheelock Architectural, Preservation + Design from Portland, Maine was selected and began work in January 2007.

At the first public visioning session on January 25, 2007, participants voiced their hopes and fears for the Flatiron building. These hopes and fears along with the suggestion of many diverse and creative uses of the building are listed in the consultant's report. Sensitive to the sentiment in the community that the auditorium be preserved and used if possible, the Committee explored the option of some sort of performing arts center in the third floor auditorium space and some level of office/arts/education space in the rest of the building.

Scenarios. In an attempt to support the low or no-income producing performing arts center, varying levels of rental income were developed for the rest of the building. This resulted in the initial development of three development scenarios for the Flatiron that are presented in the financials section of the consultant's report. The first scenario, "A", had a low level of income from arts and education related rentals. Scenario "B" had higher incomes from commercial rentals in most spaces except the performing arts center. Original Scenario "C" had all high-end rentals except for the performing arts center. Scenario "C" was also a scenario that contemplated a sale of the Flatiron to a private developer with requirements for historic preservation and development of the performing arts space. Scenario "A" would require a larger investment from the City (approximately \$8 million) than the higher income producing Scenario "B" (approximately \$3 million).

During the fall of 2007, the three scenarios evolved into five scenarios and included a lease option as Scenario "D". Instead of selling as in "C", Scenario "D" suggests a long-term lease to a private developer that includes long-term historic tax credits. Scenario "E" is the suggestion of a stronger partnership between the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) and the City of Augusta to jointly develop the Flatiron building for mutual benefit.

Research needs to be done on the finance and tax implications for the Flatiron. The possible use of historic tax credits and City TIF funds ought to be explored in depth. The recent expansion of Maine's historic tax credit through passage of LD 262: An Act to Amend the Credit for Rehabilitation of Historic Properties may prove to be a tremendous assist to the funding of this project. And, there are possible public and private grants that could be tapped for funding along with capital campaign fundraising ventures.

Condition of the Building. The consultants deemed the Flatiron to be in overall good repair. The building does need external masonry, painting and caulking work. Internally, the building requires wiring and plumbing upgrades especially in light of the potential development of a performing arts center in the third floor auditorium space. Some structural upgrades would also be required as noted in the consultant's report. In addition, present-day fire codes will require the addition of extensive fire-retardant materials. The extent and degree of fire-retardants will depend upon the various end uses of the building. See Appendix E – Maintenance Costs & Upgrades.

Seating and Access. Several factors will come together to determine the seating capacity of any performing arts center that might be finalized for the third floor: first, the installation of fire-retardant materials throughout the Flatiron building; second, the determination and installation of adequate load capacity including the balcony; third, the addition of proper egress for the balcony; and finally, fourth, aisle and row width. When used as a high school assembly hall, the seating capacity of the Flatiron auditorium was approximately 900 seats. The post-restoration seating capacity will depend upon planned use, codes and structural requirements. Future seating capacity will also depend upon possible expansion of the stage and/or the addition of stairs to the balcony.

Location and size of an elevator needed for handicap accessibility as well as use by a performing arts center on the third floor will need to be determined. The present elevator appears to be too small and too distant from the stage area.

Parking. Parking was also a concern addressed by the Committee. There are 108 “designated” parking spaces which abut the rear of the Flatiron and which are on Flatiron property. There is a space on the west side of Hannaford property which abuts the Flatiron lot where Hannaford has agreed to ‘share not more than 42 parking spaces.’ These combine for a total of approximately 150 onsite parking spaces for the Flatiron building. Criteria for the use of this “Shared Parking Area” is detailed in the attached Memorandum of Understanding between the City of Augusta, Hannaford and Cony, LLC. See Appendix F - Parking & Traffic.

A parking matrix is in the consultant’s report and indicates parking requirements for various uses of the Flatiron. The 150 number accommodates the most likely usage scenarios for the building. A four hundred space parking garage was suggested for the rear of the Flatiron building but it was deemed by the Committee to be too expensive, excessive in size and a negative visual break between the historic Flatiron and the space behind the building.

Environmental. Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessments have been completed on the Flatiron. The Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations from Phase II are attached. The full Phase I and Phase II Assessments are quite large and are available for separate review. Having these assessments in-hand will greatly assist with all types of funding scenarios in the future. Funding sources look favorably on projects with little to no environmental impacts, i.e., brownfields or otherwise polluted sites. In response to one of the recommendations from Phase II, the underground storage tank for heating oil has already been removed. See Appendix G - Environmental.

Legal. There does not appear to be any legal impediment to redevelop of the Flatiron parcel. There are no trust provisions that would impact or prevent other uses, and there is no known pending litigation that has any bearing on the future use of the premises. See Appendix H – Legal.

The Auditorium. As far back as June 28, 2007 the Committee began to hear about the physical infeasibility of inserting a professional or even a semi-professional, full-production performing arts center into what was for seventy-six years, a high school auditorium. On June 28 an invited guest of Councilor Sylvia Lund, Robert Kinsey, spoke briefly to the Committee and suggested that a performing arts center in the Flatiron auditorium was “not suitable for present day productions due to no fly space, no wings and no adequate elevator space.”

Mr. Kinsey instead suggested that the cost of converting the high school auditorium to a performing arts center would be very high. In its place, Mr. Kinsey suggested the Flatiron be used for community college and/or university space and that the old auditorium be converted as small studio and performance space.

One thing that the Committee did decide upon at its October 30 meeting was to ask UMA architectural professor, Eric Stark, to review the physical feasibility of converting the auditorium to a performing arts venue. Professor Stark accepted this assignment on a pro bona basis and submitted his review on January 28, 2008 with the conclusion that

I would humbly suggest that the Flatiron Building with its existing limitations will be difficult to make into a viable professional theater space. A huge part of what makes a theater work happens backstage, and even with major renovations, the building would have limited support spaces, making certain shows or stage actions unfeasible. In addition, the theater's location on the third floor of the building presents issues. The community aspect of the theatrical experience typically, but not always, demands a more immediate relationship with the street and thereby the community itself. This dislocation will prove a challenge requiring attention.

Professor Stark provided detailed statistics to support his conclusion. His review and bibliography are attached as part of Appendix D.

Anecdotally, though not through testimony or written comments, it has been suggested the first floor shop area, with its two floors of open space overhead, is more suitable for development as performing arts space. While this might suit those who would like performing arts space at this location, it may not meet the desires of those parties whose specific interest is in the third floor space.

It should be noted that local groups have expressed keen interest in the reuse of the Flatiron and the auditorium space in particular. The Cony Alumni Association has raised funds in the past, and there exists a not-for-profit organization named the Friends of the Flatiron that was formed with an eye towards the successful redevelopment of the building and its performing arts space. These and other organizations could play a role in any redevelopment and/or fundraising process.

The Committee still wrestled with this auditorium conversion at its October 17th and 30th, 2007 meetings. While the Committee feels strongly that Augusta needs and wants a venue for performing arts, and that there is some particular interest in the Flatiron auditorium space, it would be a challenge to make both the restoration of the auditorium and the rest of the building financially feasible. The Flatiron Committee is committed to the preservation and reuse of the building. Anything is possible but at what cost?

The Committee acknowledges that some constituencies would support the City subsidizing the immediate redevelopment and future maintenance of the Flatiron with taxpayer dollars, but we are left to wonder how deep and lasting that support would be in the face of competing demands upon limited local resources.

CONCLUSION

Presently, the Flatiron remains unoccupied. There has been little in the way of active, outward interest shown by third parties in reuse of the building. This might well be attributable to the market waiting for a firm plan for the building as well as the difficult economic times. At the same time, recent development on and near the Cony Circle has the effect of making this iconic building even more prominent in the eyes of the community, making this a good time to take the next steps.

The Flatiron Reuse Committee has worked hard in its two year deliberative process. The Committee's work and broad recommendations to the City Council are meant to provide the Council with the information, data, feedback and flexibility to develop creative solutions to meet any changing requirements and unforeseen circumstances that may develop in the future.

The Committee urges the Council to consider the following recommendations during its deliberations on the reuse of the Flatiron:

1. The historic integrity of the Flatiron should be preserved.
2. Any expenditure by the City for and in support of the Flatiron must be consistent with the financial capacity and spending priorities of Augusta residents.
3. All *reasonable* efforts should be made to preserve and restore the auditorium as a viable regional, semi-professional performing arts venue, perhaps in concert with UMA and other arts groups.
4. The Council should consider either selling or leasing the Flatiron building and land to a developer through a Request for Proposals process. The Committee does not recommend that the City act as the developer, given the associated high costs and risks. The choice of a developer need not be limited to private entities and could possibly include an educational institution, regional arts group, an association, non-profit or a combination of any of these. The RFP should be designed to solicit a broad range of development proposals, with favorable consideration given to proposals preserving the existing auditorium for community performing arts space, if possible and practical. Community sentiment seems to favor a long-term lease arrangement, as opposed to an outright sale, if feasible from a developer's perspective.
5. The only consideration for housing at the Flatiron should be as artists' housing and studio space.
6. Subject to economic and other considerations, the Council should act as soon as possible to resolve the Flatiron Reuse question.