



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 26, 2019

City closes Playhouse used by Murfreesboro Little Theatre

City decision stems from recently identified structural and fire code issues with building; City working with theatre group to secure alternative space

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. — The City of Murfreesboro notified Murfreesboro Little Theatre Thursday of the City's decision to immediately close the city-owned building the performing arts theatre currently utilizes. The City of Murfreesboro owns the Playhouse property, which has been leased to the Murfreesboro Little Theatre since 2005.

The current term of the lease is set to expire in April 2020. Under the lease, the Murfreesboro Little Theatre is responsible for maintaining the property in accordance with the City's property maintenance and fire codes. The City's fire marshal and codes officials conducted a full inspection of the facility Friday, July 26. After reviewing the findings of the inspection, City staff will take additional actions as appropriate.

Depending on the results of complete fire and structural safety inspections, the City may look to terminate the lease agreement with the Murfreesboro Little Theatre.

"While the need for performing arts space in our community is obviously of great value and importance, the City cannot consciously allow a building deemed unsafe to be occupied nor does the City maintain confidence in the ability to resolve issues of non-compliance," said Community Services Executive Director Angela Jackson.

On July 24, 2019, Angela Jackson notified Charlie Parker, president of the Murfreesboro Little Theatre Board of Directors, that the City had identified "fire and life safety hazards" in the structure and suggested that the performing arts theatre cease summer programs at the building, effective immediately. Parker also notified the Board Thursday as well as children enrolled in summer camp improv programs.

The City does not believe upgrades to meet City Codes are a financially viable option for the building.

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“Murfreeboro Little Theatre has hosted many programs and community arts events over the years at this site, and a decision like this is never easy and is not taken lightly,” said Community Services Executive Director Angela Jackson. “However, the most important factor in our decision is public safety. Our Parks and Recreation Department will be working to assist by providing available space in the immediate future to accommodate their children’s summer program and other community art events.”

The City Parks & Recreation Department is hosting a small number of children for the Murfreeboro Little Theatre children’s summer camp Friday and Saturday, July 26-27, at the Bradley Academy & Cultural Arts Center, 415 South Academy Street and at Patterson Park Community Center, 521 Mercury Blvd., or another Parks location. These weekend activities will conclude the summer program.

“During my initial visit to the Playhouse, I noted imminent threats to life safety regarding the lack of working fire alarm or suppression systems, proper emergency egress and exit pathways, or proper stairwell egress,” said Fire Marshal Carl Peas. “Additionally, the storage of significant amounts of combustibles, and concerns with structural stability present significant danger to responding firefighters even if the building is unoccupied. Thus, I strongly suggested that all public performances at the Playhouse should cease immediately and combustible items stored there should be removed as soon as practical.”

City Building & Codes Director Robert Holtz stated that the building is “structurally unsound.”

“During our initial inspection July 24, we noticed sagging floor joists over the theater area. The amount of sag was appreciable and was partially-supported by a wall constructed from logs that were part of the original construction. One log at the bottom of the wall had shifted and rolled partially out of the wall causing concern that additional loading could be added to a floor system that was already sagging.”

Holtz added, “The one set of stairs that serves the four floors of the structure were soft in some areas and temporary supports had been added to the stairs. These walls created passageways that were narrow and could make search and rescue confusing in a basement. The age of the structure and the lack of maintenance through the years have caused the building to deteriorate to the point that structural stability and life safety were being compromised.”

Built in 1939 by the Youth Council of the Works Progress Administration, the facility on Ewing Blvd. first served a Scout Lodge for many years. Murfreeboro Little Theatre has performed there since the early 1960s, and Murfreeboro Parks and Recreation Department’s Sunshine Players shared the stage from 1989 to 1995 as well.

For more information on Community Risk Reduction, contact MFRD Fire Marshal, Assistant Chief Carl Peas at 615-849-2605. For information on Building & Codes, contact City Public Information Director Mike Browning at 615-849-2629.

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