



Department of Arts & Cultural Affairs

&

Department of Community Planning & Economic Development

2024 THE COWLES CENTER: RFP (Request for Proposals) FOR NEW OPERATING ENTITY

Date posted: September 30, 2024

Proposals Due: January 30, 2025

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1. Introduction

The City of Minneapolis Department of Arts and Cultural Affairs (ACA), in collaboration with the Department of Community Planning and Economic Development (CPED), are pleased to offer an exciting opportunity for a well-qualified non-profit organization to lease, manage, operate, and program the Cowles Center for Dance & the Performing Arts in downtown Minneapolis.

The City of Minneapolis (the City) owns a ground lease interest in the property and facilitated State of Minnesota funding for the renovation of the facility that occurred fifteen years ago. The Cowles Center property is located at 516 Hennepin Ave and consists of the Goodale Theater (historically known as the Shubert Theater, a designated City landmark), Cowles Center Dance Studio, front of house and back of house office and storage spaces, the two-story lobby/atrium, ticket office and food/beverage station. The property does not include the historic Hennepin Center for the Arts building next door, which is owned and operated by Artspace HCA LLC. The new lessee will need to maintain a working relationship with Artspace because of the physical connections between the buildings and complementary facilities in the Hennepin Center for the Arts. The City is seeking a venue lessee to steward, operate, and program the Cowles Center facility in a way that meets the requirements of the State funding and creates a world-class center for artistic expression and education with a focus on dance. Proposers must have experience with multi-disciplinary performing arts production and curation, professional venue management, and community and coalition building, as well as a demonstrated commitment to arts education, accessibility and inclusion. Proposer should have a deep knowledge of the Minneapolis dance and performing arts ecosystem, with a specialty in dance development/residency, dance production, dance presentation/curation, arts education, and multidisciplinary performing arts funding, booking, producing, presenting, and touring.

2. Background

Located in the heart of downtown Minneapolis on Hennepin Avenue, The Cowles Center for Dance & the Performing Arts opened its doors as a hub for dance in 2011. This opening represented a culmination of years of work by the City of Minneapolis, Artspace, and numerous supporters of dance. In 1999, the City moved the Shubert Theater from Block E (now Mayo Clinic Square) across the street to its current location to prevent the Theater's demolition. Artspace stepped in to develop a plan, own the property, raise funds, and manage construction to renovate the Theater.

To help fund the design and renovation of the Cowles Center, the City accepted \$12 million in bonding grants from the State of Minnesota in 2006 and 2009. The construction grant required the City to take an ownership interest in the facility via a ground lease, and the City in turn leased its interest to an affiliate of Artspace called Minnesota Shubert Center for Dance and Music, Inc. (now known as The Cowles Center), to operate its dance and educational programming. Artspace will continue to own the land underlying the facility and ground lease the property to the City.

As required by the State funding, the City is responsible for ensuring the implementation of the "Governmental Program" at the facility, which the City passed on to The Cowles Center through a use lease.

Definition of Governmental Program: “...establish and maintain a performing arts and education center for the purposes of public arts education and dance, music, and other performances and other related and ancillary functions.”

This requirement is in place as long as the City has a ground lease for the property and includes annual reporting on programming and finances from the operator of the facility. The ground lease lasts until 2059.

Renovation of the Shubert Theater and construction of the lobby building unfolded in 2010-2011 with a grand opening in September 2011. The first performance in the newly renovated Cowles Center was the Ragamala Dance Company, and it was heralded upon its opening as a new “home for dance.” From opening through March 2024, the Cowles Center organization, with support from Artspace, programmed, operated, and funded the facility.

The Cowles Center is named after John and Sage Cowles, who were important advocates and supporters of Minneapolis-based dance companies for generations. The Goodale Theater was named after Bob and Kathy Goodale, who were long term supporters of the dance community as well.

The Cowles Center is regionally and nationally renowned as an important center and home for dance presentation and education, supporting the wide roster of dance forms located in Minneapolis and the Twin Cities. Dance forms featured have included a diverse roster of Hip Hop, Modern, Contemporary, Ballet, Tap, Jazz, Flamenco, South Asian, and all global forms to name a few. The Cowles Center is considered a premiere, world-class stage that has raised the profile of the local arts ecology, and it has been heralded as an important incubator and champion of emerging and established artists and an important tool that allows the Minnesota-based dance community to build their careers and drive creative and economic impact to downtown.

In early 2024, Artspace announced that it would no longer operate the Cowles Center and terminated the use lease with the City for the facility. Since April 1, 2024, the City has managed the facility keeping it closed and monitored until finding a new operator. With this RFP, the City is seeking to identify a new lessee to deliver the Governmental Program in a financially feasible manner. The City would enter into a new use lease agreement with the selected entity.

Earlier this year, the City engaged the community through a range of events to gather input about the future of the Cowles Center and to inform this RFP. ACA hosted a community meeting on March 4, 2024, at the Women’s Club to gather input from the dance community most affected by this transition. There were approximately 250 people, including virtual attendants. A second community meeting was held on April 6, 2024 at the Center for Performing Arts to voice the community concerns directly to Mayor Jacob Frey, who was also in attendance. Additionally, there were two virtual community gatherings hosted by the MN Artist Coalition and Arena Dances. Lastly, Mayor Jacob Frey, ACA and CPED hosted an additional meeting with key dance/theater/non-profit and for-profit downtown leaders on August 5, 2024 at the Mayor’s office to address community’s concerns. The most common themes that arose from these community meetings include:

- Equity/inclusion (Addressing systemic racism)
- Education (Cowles K-12 dance program, Professional development)
- Awareness (Which types of dance and arts are prioritized if any)
- Access (Access to the venue, Parking issues, particularly expenses, Downtown safety concerns)

- Financial support (Economic justice and equity, City government to step in and help the dance community more and not just relying on philanthropy/private charity)

3. Proposer Qualifications

The City is prioritizing the following qualifications each Proposer should possess:

Facility Management

- A successful history of theater/venue management, experience overseeing performing arts venues with a minimum seating capacity of 500, and experience booking/presenting more than 100+ public events per year and managing a facility year-round.
- Successful experience and knowledge of theater administration, IATSE, production/tech/crew, scheduling, ticketing, technology, marketing, hospitality, artist and audience services, sanitation, security, maintenance, rentals, volunteers, accessibility, community engagement, cross-sector partnerships, and staff training/workforce development.
- Sufficient staffing capacity and expertise to produce a high-level of facility, artistic and educational activity.

Programming and Presentation

- Successful experience producing/supporting emerging and established Minneapolis-based dance/performing artists with the fulfillment of their final presentation – from early residency/workshop opportunities, research and ideation, rehearsal and production/tech assistance, engaging with local creative teams and critical feedback, and final presentation and fulfillment.
- The ability to fulfill an educational component that offers dance, music, theater arts, visual arts and interdisciplinary workshops/hybrid learning, and professional development and training in partnership with other organizations or on your own.
- A demonstrable knowledge about the local, regional, national, and international touring and performing arts market, funders, and service organizations, as well as an excellent reputation amongst local, regional, and national peers.
- The established relationships with high-level and culturally relevant artists who expect to be presented, and the ability to evaluate and identify artistic choices that bring added value to the reputation of the venue.
- A track record as a seasoned presenter of professionally staged events of all forms, with the knowledge of how to book, negotiate, contract, and produce cultural events that elevate the quality of life in the Cowles Center.
- The ability to program for families, youth, and diverse communities.
- The ability to program the theater, lobby, and studio year-round providing multiple points of access to a diverse roster of Minneapolis-based arts and cultural organizations.

Fiscal Responsibility

- Excellent, demonstrable financial standing of the organization, with a track record of fiscal responsibility and transparency.

- A history of high-level contributed and earned income including maintaining and cultivating donor relations, sponsorships, major gifts, national foundational support, and multiple forms of philanthropy and other models of earned income generation.
- A proven success in managing ticketing and POS systems and launching marketing and PR campaigns through various forms of social media, especially to diverse communities, including illustrating the ability to provide data, metrics, and survey information.

Community and Access

- The skills to illustrate an understanding of the Cowles Center performing arts ecosystem and its relationship to artists/arts organization in Minneapolis, and how to best position the Cowles Center – and this community – to be at the forefront of artistic expression that leverages unique partnerships and collaboration with other leading institutions and artistic collaborators.
- The depth of understanding of the Minneapolis cross-sector cultural ecosystems, and attestable experience in programming for maximum impact within this context.
- An irrefutable cultural competency and commitment to racial equity, inclusion, and access.
- Understanding of this venue to support the revitalization of downtown Minneapolis, welcome and enhance the experience of artists, audiences, and visitors, and to work collaboratively with downtown cultural providers, businesses, and tourism to increase the value and name brand of this facility and the city of Minneapolis.

4. Operating Objectives

Informed by engagement with the dance community, cultural venues, and the broader downtown community and stakeholders, the City formulated the following objectives for the Cowles Center that the selected lessee should achieve:

- a. Fulfill the required Governmental Program for the facility: establish and maintain a performing arts and education center for the purposes of public arts education and dance, music, and other performances and other related and ancillary functions.
- b. Maximize the Cowles Center as a community engagement resource and symbol of community pride, through the year-round programming of diverse professional dance, performing arts and educational events, along with offering a variety of cultural forums through unique partnerships and collaborations.
 - Key community stakeholders include the dance community, multi-disciplinary artists and culture workers, diverse arts organizations, property owners, funders, Minneapolis Public Schools, higher education, merchants, stakeholders, vendors, elders, service organizations and business owners in downtown Minneapolis and the surrounding neighborhood, wellness providers, festivals, merchants, service, residential and neighborhood organizations, restaurants in the downtown and surrounding areas.
- c. Promote the Cowles Center as a global center for professional dance, artistic expression and performing arts education, reaffirming its place as a hub of cultural activity that specializes in presenting diverse cultural traditions.
- d. Use the Cowles Center as an anchor and catalyst for vibrancy, economic development, and revitalization of Downtown Minneapolis, and to be a beacon for the creative community, downtown business community, and a broad spectrum of Minnesota audiences and visitors.

- e. Serve as a center for diverse community celebrations and in gathering, belonging, and cultural connection, and ensure that fair and equitable access is provided to artists and community-based organizations that focus on engagement, partnership, equity, racial justice and delivering high-quality, culturally sensitive programming at affordable rates and ticket fees.
- f. Identify and reduce hurdles to access for artists and communities.
- g. Become a home for professional dance and performing artists through anchoring and nurturing established and emerging Minnesota-based artists, cultural and service organizations with a primary focus on the local communities and consideration of regional and statewide connections.
- h. Become a creative center for diverse cultural talent reflective of the surrounding area, through presentations and youth development programs.
- i. Safeguard the public's significant level of capital investment by ensuring the Cowles Center building, advanced technology and equipment are safe, clean, consistently maintained and regularly updated so that the facility will continue to be a cultural asset for the city. The equipment includes but is not limited to:
 - Front of House Equipment (i.e. ticketing systems, computers, lobby furniture and lighting, chairs, tables, stands, office equipment, and merch/beverage sales, and miscellaneous equipment)
 - Back of House (i.e. production and staging equipment, chairs, risers, music stands, scrims, flies, piping, draping, sound shell, piano, all production hardware and tools, and miscellaneous equipment)
 - Light and Sound Equipment (all lighting instruments, speakers, mixers, monitors, microphones, headsets, cables, projectors, screens, miscellaneous equipment)
 - Shelving and Storage Equipment.

5. Terms of the Use Lease Agreement

The selected operator will enter into a Use Lease Agreement with the City for the facility. See the form of the agreement in the Exhibits to this RFP. The State of Minnesota will need to review and approve the final version of the agreement to confirm that the terms meet the requirements of the State bond structure (see the [Checklist for Use Agreements](#) from the State of Minnesota Management and Budget). The Minneapolis City Council and Mayor will also need to approve the terms of the agreement. Key terms of the agreement are expected to include:

- Requirement to deliver dance, performing arts and educational programming that fulfills the definition of the Governmental Program, recognizing that local dance has been a primary focus of the venue since its opening.
- No payment of rent to the City, however the operator is responsible for the operating costs of the facility including taxes, assessments, insurance, building upgrades, personnel, technology, maintenance, sanitation, security, production equipment, and programming.
- An initial term of twelve (12) years with the option to renew for two successive periods, the first of which shall be for twelve (12) years, and the second shall be for the remaining term of the Ground Lease subject to review and to successfully meeting the terms of the agreement.
- Annual reporting requirements to the City, including:
 - A report of major activities for the current fiscal year and a description of how the activities meet the Governmental Program including:

- # of total ticketed events and event types
- # local dance companies / artists and other companies presented/produced
- # tickets sold / comped
- # dark days
- # education activities and participation numbers
- audience demographics
- other programmatic initiatives.
- The report should include how programs support access, inclusion and equity, including regular feedback sessions with diverse community groups to ensure the venue is being responsive to the needs of our constituencies.
- The report should also describe engagement within the arts community, downtown business community, and tourism to demonstrate creative and economic impact and engagement.
- An annual budget for the next fiscal year, which demonstrates that forecast revenues will be equal to or exceed forecast expenses.
- Projected budgets for the next three fiscal years.
- Report on capital improvements to the facility; adherence to all City permits and regulations.
- Audited annual financial statements.
- Ability for the City to reserve and use the facility rent-free to host public events up to 25 "City Days" annually.
- Evidence of proper insurance

6. Potential Funding

There is a potential source of capital funding to support the Cowles Center. In 2019 the State of Minnesota authorized a \$550,000 State bonding grant for capital improvements to the facility. These funds are in addition to the \$12 million from the State for the initial renovation project. The original intent behind the \$550,000 was to pay for an elevator, but they may be used to repair or replace other parts of the theater building and building systems.

In late 2023, the City entered into a grant agreement with the State for the funds, but has not yet taken steps to deploy them. The City would work with the selected operator to determine an appropriate scope and process for utilizing the funds.

7. Required Proposal Content

Response to this RFP must contain the following elements:

- Cover Page with contact information
- Signed Consent for Release of Response Data Form (see Exhibits)
- Business Plan to include the following:
 1. Executive Summary
 - a. Vision Statement: The long-term goals and aspirations of the Cowles Center facility.

- b. Overview: A summary of the key points of the business plan.
 2. Organization Description
 - a. Mission Statement: A brief statement about the Proposer’s purpose and core values.
 - b. Artistic Statement: Description why the Proposer is the ideal candidate for this opportunity.
 - c. History and Background: Information about the Proposer’s origins, founders, and significant milestones.
 - d. Team and Experience
 - e. Nonprofit Status: Evidence of not-for-profit incorporation and status.
 3. Market Analysis
 - a. Industry Overview: A general overview of the performance venue industry, including trends and growth potential.
 - b. Competitive Analysis: An assessment of other performance venues in the area, their strengths and weaknesses, and how your approach will differentiate itself.
 - c. Market Needs: Identification of gaps in the market that the Proposer aims to fill.
 - d. Target Market: Detailed information about the demographics, psychographics, and behavior of the intended audiences.
 4. Organization and Management
 - a. Organizational Structure: An organizational chart outlining key roles and responsibilities.
 - b. Management Team: Profiles of the management team, highlighting their experience and qualifications.
 - c. Advisory Board: Information about any advisors or board members who will provide guidance and support.
 5. Programs and Services
 - a. Governmental Program: Description of how the proposer will fulfill the required Governmental Program: “... establish and maintain a performing arts and education center for the purposes of public arts education and dance, music, and other performances and other related and ancillary functions.”
 - b. Type of Performances: Description of the types of shows and events the Proposer will offer (e.g., dance, plays, musicals, concerts, film screenings, etc.).
 - c. Season Planning: How the Proposer will schedule and plan its seasons to maximize use in all spaces.
 - d. Education Programs: Describe the variety of education programs that will be offered to the community.
 - e. Describe a rental program that ensures maximum utilization and equitable access to all areas of the facility for the arts community. The program should balance the needs of local performing arts organizations, youth development initiatives, and for-profit/commercial rentals. It should also account for the City’s reserved use and allocate up to 25 "City Days" annually, during which the City can use the facility rent-free to host public events.
 - f. Additional Services: Other services the Proposer may offer, such as workshops, facility rentals, professional development, etc.
 6. Marketing and Sales Strategy
 - a. Marketing Plan: Detailed strategies for promoting the facility, its performances, and educational programming, including online and offline marketing tactics.

- b. Sales Strategy: How tickets will be sold (e.g., box office, online sales) and pricing strategies.
 - c. Audience Development: Plans for building and maintaining a loyal audience base, including outreach and engagement initiatives.
 - d. Downtown Strategy: Describe how you will engage with downtown business community and cultural organizations and actively participate in centering the Cowles as an important part of the vibrancy and the cultural ecosystem of downtown.
7. Operational Plan
- a. Transition: Description of the activities that need to occur before the Proposer can take over responsibility for the facility, including a schedule of personnel recruitment, hiring of local labor, garnering programmatic expertise, and maintaining existing and acquiring new equipment and artists' amenities.
 - b. Daily Operations: Description of the day-to-day operations of the theater.
 - c. Production Management: How productions will be managed from pre-production to post-production. Describe experience working with IATSE contracts and labor.
 - d. Facilities Management: Maintenance and management of the theater building including the venue exteriors, marquee, building systems, and a proposed maintenance calendar for capital improvements and upkeep of the physical plant.
 - i. Note that the Goodale/Shubert Theater is a locally designated landmark and changes to historic elements of the building would require review by the City's Heritage Preservation Commission.
 - e. Technology: Use of technology in ticketing, marketing, and production.
 - f. Relaunch: Vision for the successful relaunch and reopening of the facility
8. Financial Plan
- a. Startup Budget: Budget of the costs and sources of funds needed to reach the point when the Proposer takes over the facility.
 - b. Projections: In Excel format, projected income statements, balance sheets, and cash flow statements for the first five years upon taking over the facility.
 - c. Revenues: Description of the different sources of and assumptions for ongoing income, such as ticket sales, concessions, sponsorships, donations, grants, and merchandise.
 - d. Expenses: Description of the different types of and assumptions for ongoing operational and production costs, including personnel, programming, marketing, utilities, and maintenance.
 - e. Audited Financials: Provide the Proposer's most recent annual audited financials.
9. Risk Management
- a. Risk Assessment: Identification of potential risks and challenges the facility may face.
 - b. Mitigation Strategies: Plans to mitigate or manage these risks.
10. Appendices
- a. Supporting Documents: Any additional documents that support the business plan, such as market research data, resumes of the management team, legal documents, and letters of support from sponsors, partners, artists, educators, and/or community.

8. Evaluation

City staff will evaluate all proposals submitted by the deadline to determine compliance with proposal requirements and mandatory document submissions.

Proposals will be scored in each of the criteria below. A comprehensive evaluation of the proposals by a panel of City staff and/or non-City stakeholders will be conducted.

The evaluation panel may interview proposers and/or submit follow up questions for the purpose of clarifying matters in the proposals. Finalists may also need to give a public presentation on their proposal at a community meeting.

Criteria	Maximum Points
How well Proposer meets the qualifications in this RFP	20
Demonstrable capacity to fulfill the Operating Objectives	20
Thoroughness, clarity, and feasibility of business plan	50
Interview	10
Total	100

The City reserves the right to request additional information to clarify a proposal. Furthermore, the City reserves the right to conduct such investigations as the City considers appropriate with respect to the qualifications of each Proposer and any information contained in their materials.

Ultimately the City Council and Mayor would approve the selection of a new operator and the terms of the Use Lease Agreement, which would be in a subsequent action. The State of Minnesota must also review and approve the final version of the Use Lease Agreement.

The City reserves the right to reject any or all proposals or parts of proposals and to negotiate modifications to an entire proposal or specific components of the scope of work within a proposal to create activities of lesser or greater magnitude than described in this RFP or the submitted proposal.

9. Important Dates

RFP Questions or Changes

Proposers may direct questions about RFP by email to: mplsaca@minneapolismn.gov no later than 10/22/24 Responses will be posted 10/29/24. The City reserves the right to modify this RFP at any time. An addendum will be posted 11/5/24 if the RFP is modified.

Informational Meeting/Site Visit

All applicants are required to attend one of two available site visits to be held on 11/6/24 10am-Noon and 11/13/24 10am-Noon. For meeting instructions and RSVP

<https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/828a652ecd5d44dbac135a67c8fc16d6>

Proposal Submission

Proposals and supporting documentation must be submitted to mplsaca@minneapolismn.gov

Responses must be received not later than 4:30 p.m. Central Time, on 1/30/25. Incomplete proposals may be rejected. Proposals must be submitted by the application deadline. Late proposals will not be considered.

Release of RFP: 9/30/24

Questions on RFP due: 10/22/24

Answers to RFP posted: 10/29/24

Required Site visit: 11/6/24 or 11/13/24

RFP deadline: 1/30/25

RFPs review period: February-April 2025

City Council and Mayor review and approval of new operator: May 2025

10. Exhibits

01. Floor and site plans
02. Photos
03. Technical specs and non-theatrical equipment
04. Consent for release of response data form
05. Cowles lease use agreement template
06. Property condition assessment report (when ready)

No Applicant Recourse

The City shall not be responsible for any costs incurred by proposers in connection with this RFP. Proposers shall bear all costs associated with proposal preparation and submission, and any other activity associated with this RFP. This RFP does not commit the City to award a contract. Submission of a proposal shall neither obligate nor entitle any proposer to enter into a contract with the City.