

LAND AND SPACE

Revised King Library apartments project would include lobby from 1920s-era theater

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Published 10:14 a.m. CT Sep. 2, 2021 | Updated 10:43 a.m. CT Sep. 2, 2021

A revised design for a new King Library branch and attached apartments now includes redeveloping part of a neighboring former theater — and replacing much of the building with surface parking spaces.

The development proposal from General Capital Group LLP and Emem Group LLC again calls for a four-story building at the northwest corner of North King Drive and West Locust Street. It would replace the current King Library branch.

It would feature a new King Library and retail space on the first floor, and 41 apartments on the three upper floors.

The plans also call for a four-story, 43-unit apartment building at the block's other end, at the southwest corner of North King Drive and West Chambers Street.

Meanwhile, the lobby portion of the former Garfield Theatre, which is in the middle of the block at 2933-2957 N. King Drive, would be converted into nine live-work units, said Sig Strautmanis, General Capital Group partner.

The rest of the former theater would be demolished to help make more room for surface parking behind the buildings, Strautmanis said Thursday at a meeting of the Library Board of Trustees Building and Development Committee.

Much of the former theater is in "decrepit" shape, said David Weiss, a General Capital Group partner.

Those plans, including the sale of the current library site, need Common Council approval.

That review process is to begin in October, said Michael Emem, who operates Emem Group.

The plans drew positive remarks from development committee members, including Ald. Nik Kovac.

Kovac said he liked the combination of the apartment buildings' contemporary design with the redeveloped historic theater lobby.

"Things are looking wonderful so far," said Mark Sain, committee chair.

The Garfield Theatre operated from 1927 to 1965.

The building later housed Opportunities Industrialization Center of Greater Milwaukee Inc. before that nonprofit social services group closed in 2005. It has since been owned by Philadelphia Church of God in Christ.

The project's financing would include federal affordable housing tax credits.

In return for receiving those credits, developers are required to provide apartments at below-market rents to people earning no higher than 60% of the local median income.

The Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority in April granted tax credits for the King Library project and other Milwaukee developments.

The King Library project has been delayed for years.

The initial proposal was approved in December 2016 by library officials. But that plan, from Young Development Group LLC, had difficulty with raising financing.

General Capital later joined the effort, and Young Development was replaced in 2020 by Emem Group.

Four other Milwaukee library branches have been replaced by new libraries with upper-level apartments.

The city pays for the portions of the new buildings that have the library spaces, which it owns. The rest of the projects are owned and financed by private developers.

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