



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

People skate during Big Gay Skate Night at the Astoria Armory Saturday.

Armory: ‘What we’re doing is creating a community center’

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one to make the return to the Armory’s original use official.

Buying the armory

Craft3 acquired the Armory from the Columbia River Maritime Museum, which was using it for storage since the early 2000s. They leased it to the Friends for \$1 a year and handed the group the keys in June 2014.

Walt Postlewait, a chief lending officer with Craft3 speaking in support of the Armory Wednesday, said the financial firm leased it to the group for two reasons: to find out whether the community wanted an armory, and whether it needed it.

Armory volunteers put in more than 1,000 hours cleaning up the Armory after Craft3 bought it, and a few weeks after getting the keys, Jones said, there were 500 people in the stands watching a Shanghai Roller Dolls bout. Jones said the Armory has had more than 175 events since then, with some of the revenues supporting free medical and dental clinics. And the Friends, he said, had calculated about 7,000 volunteer hours in the first nine months.

Craft3 is preparing a mortgage for the Armory, which it had previously offered to the Friends for \$250,000, and a loan to help with capital improvements.

Bringing it back

“What we’re doing is creating a community center,” Jones, former commander of local U.S. Coast Guard forces, said during a recent tour of the building. Joining him was Stein, a recent addition to the board with a background in real estate brokerage.

Groups can lease the building for \$700 a day, and the Friends also lease out smaller rooms for events, such as birthday parties.

Built for large USO shows during World War II, the Armory spans 40,000 square feet over two floors and a third-floor mezzanine, all under a unique Dutch-style lamella roof, criss-crossed with arches. In its heyday, the Armory held up to 3,000 people for events like a speech more than 50 years ago by then Vice President Richard Nixon to concerts with Bop Hope, the Camel Caravan, Deep Purple, The Zombies and Buffalo Springfield.

In the 1990s, the Clatsop Christian Church held services and skating at the Armory. But by the 2000s, there were only relics being stored



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Bruce Jones shows a window in the Astoria Armory. Many of the windows are rusted and will need to be fixed or replaced.

‘We see this as the best outcome for the community.’

— Walt Postlewait

a chief lending officer with Craft3, speaking of the sale of the Armory to the Friends, adding Craft3 is not making money on the deal

The Friends have stayed in the black through events and all the donated labor and materials, Jones said. But to better market the Armory, he and Stein said, improvements are needed.

The northern entrance to the Armory, currently a 20-foot drop to the sidewalk, needs to be rebuilt to provide an extra access point. The Friends also want to make the bathrooms at the Armory Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible; build a commercial kitchen in the concession stand; refurbish and make operable the rusted, rustic windows atop the gymnasium to improve air flow and tear out the carpet in the lobby, refurbishing the hardwood floors.

The Armory can hold about 750 people. The improvements could conceivably increase the capacity of the Armory to historic levels. The Friends’ comfort zone, Jones said, is about 1,500 attendees at an event. The Seaside Civic and Convention Center can fit up to 1,200 people in theater seating throughout its two main rooms.

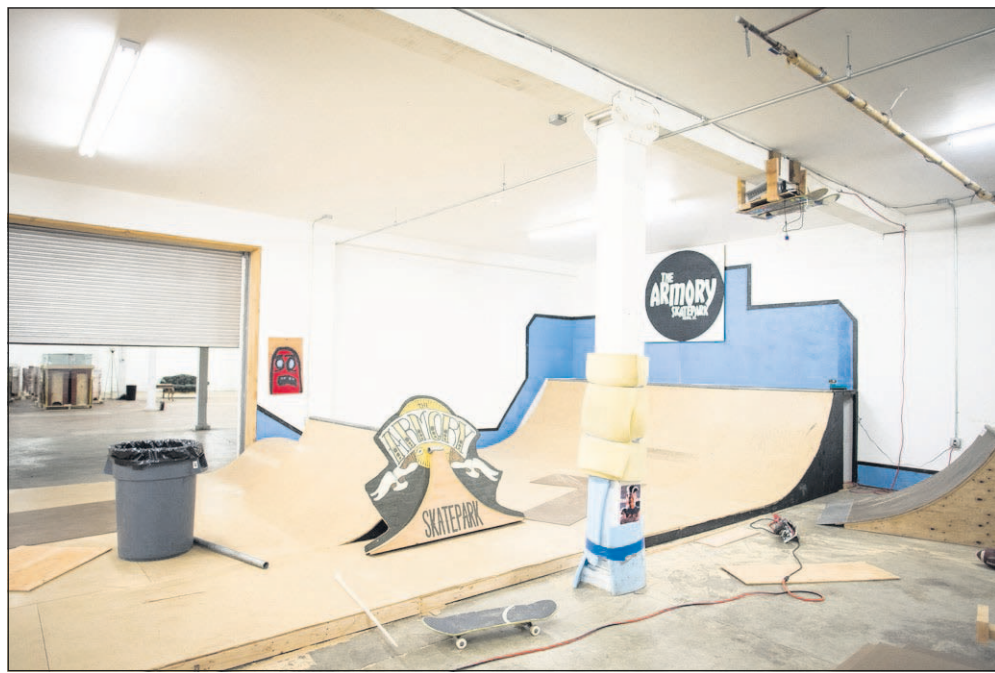
Stein said the Armory and Liberty Theater board have an agreement to not compete. “They promised us no roller skating at the Liberty, and we promised them no operas here,” he said.

The Armory aims to be a cornerstone of downtown and an economic driver, Jones said, and the Friends hope more events will help them hire employees to join events coordinator Robyn Koustik, the Friends’ lone employee.

The Armory Benefit Concert, the new nonprofit’s first fundraiser, kicks off Oct. 10 with Astoria rock group Violet Underground, followed by the funk- and rock-infused Jesse Lee Falls Band.

“We see this as the best outcome for the community,” Postlewait said of selling the Armory to the Friends, adding Craft3 is not making money on the deal.

But from the thousands of volunteer hours and all the events, Postlewait told the Planning Commission Wednesday, the Friends have proven the community needs and wants the Armory.



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

The skatepark in the basement of the Astoria Armory is being added to but offers an indoor place to skate during the day.

on the gym floor and in the climate-controlled basement by the Maritime Museum, along with

what Jones described as 25 years of accumulated pigeon poop volunteers had to clean up.

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