STERLING OPERA HOUSE COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
Monday, July 13, 2026
6:00 p.m.

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1. Call to Order

The regular monthly meeting of the Sterling Opera House Commission was called to order at 6:02 p.m. on Monday, July 13, 2026.

2. Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

3. Roll Call

Members present were Gino DiGiovanni, Brian Coppolo, Dana Florenza, Carleigh Paecht, and Karleen Guluzzy. Five members were present, and a quorum was established.

4. Additions, Deletions, Corrections to Agenda - None

5. Approval of Minutes

The Chair reported that the Commission continued working with Linda Fusco to bring prior meeting minutes up to date. Dana Florenza moved to table approval of the minutes.

6. Public Portion

The Chair opened the public portion and invited members of the public attending in person and by Zoom to state their name and address for the record before speaking.

Dave Condon, 50 Beatrice Drive, West Haven, Connecticut, provided an update regarding the 501(c)(3). He reported that the organization filed its first Form 990 with the federal government, its first state report, and the required forms to maintain its status as a public charity, all of which were approved. He stated that the organization remains in good standing for another year. Mr. Condon also reported that he spoke with the president of the New Haven Center for Performing Arts, which oversees the Shubert Theatre, Tennis Center, and other venues, and that the discussion was very positive. He stated that once the Steinberg Hart report is received and the project cost is known, the fundraising plan will be developed, and the 501(c)(3) board will be expanded. He further stated that the organization intends to begin actively recruiting board members and preparing a fundraising plan for the project.

Gary Collins, 273 Derby Avenue, Derby, Connecticut, spoke in support of the Sterling Opera House project and expressed concern that the current administration should be more actively involved. He stated that the project is important to Derby and could generate revenue for restaurants and other local businesses. Mr. Collins encouraged greater participation by City officials and public support for the project.

The Chair noted for the record that Alderwoman Sarah Widomowski was present on Zoom. There being no further public comment, a motion was made and seconded to close the public portion. The motion carried unanimously.

7. Old Business

a. Report on Meeting with Linda Fusco on June 26, 2026

The Chair reported that, following inquiries from entities interested in holding fundraising events at the Sterling Opera House, he and Dana Florenza met with Linda Fusco. The Chair stated that Ms. Fusco spoke with the Mayor and advised that events may only take place if they are citywide events, like the 350th celebration or Derby Day. The Commission noted that future inquiries, including walking tours and similar events, would need to be adjusted accordingly.

8. New Business

a. Steinberg Hart Final Findings and Recommendations

Evan Delli Paoli, principal and architect with Steinberg Hart, presented the final findings of the comprehensive study for the Sterling Opera House. He explained that Steinberg Hart led a larger consultant team that included Webb Management for arts advisory and market assessment services, Stages Consultants for theater and acoustics consulting, Kohler-Ronan Engineers for mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and fire protection engineering, KCI/McLaren Engineers for structural assessment, and Cost Plus Consultants for cost estimating.

Mr. Delli Paoli stated that the study focused on three primary areas: a market needs assessment, an existing conditions assessment, and recommendations for capital improvements. He explained that the market assessment examined local and regional arts trends, competitor venues, and potential user demand. The study identified a market opportunity for a venue smaller than 1,500 seats but larger than approximately 300 seats, and concluded that the Sterling Opera House could fill a regional gap. The recommended primary uses included presented live arts and entertainment, such as comedy and popular music, with secondary uses including nonprofit rentals, commercial rentals, film, educational programs, and community gatherings.

Mr. Delli Paoli reported that the study recommends next steps including completion of a business plan and future identification of an operating partner. He outlined a process for identifying an operator, including developing a contact list, publishing a request for proposals, evaluating respondents, entering into a memorandum of understanding, and later transitioning to a lease agreement.

The existing building was described as approximately 28,000 gross square feet, with approximately 18,000 to 19,000 square feet of usable space. Mr. Delli Paoli stated that the exterior has been reasonably well maintained, with expected issues such as brick efflorescence and repointing needs. He noted that the building is a zero-lot-line site and that an easement or variance would be needed for a proposed elevator addition, accessible entry, loading dock, and exterior equipment areas.

The presentation reviewed the condition of the interior, including peeling lead paint and deterioration of plaster, but noted that the building appeared generally dry and free from significant rot or decay. The existing horseshoe-shaped balcony and intimate audience chamber were identified as key historic features to be preserved. Mr. Delli Paoli stated that

the Connecticut building code and existing building code allow preservation of historic elements, provided required life-safety improvements are incorporated.
The structural assessment found that the building is primarily wood-framed, with load-bearing brick masonry walls and some cast iron columns. The study recommends new mechanical, electrical, plumbing, fire protection, and sprinkler systems. Acoustical recommendations include replacing deteriorated plaster surfaces and designing new HVAC systems to minimize mechanical noise.
The study also evaluated historic tax credit opportunities, noting that the Sterling Opera House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Mr. Delli Paoli outlined the anticipated historic tax credit process, including evaluation of the building's eligibility, review of proposed rehabilitation work during design, and final review of completed work by the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service.
The capital improvement recommendations included reusing lower-level and street-level spaces for theater support functions, dressing rooms, production offices, public lobby space, restrooms, and related uses. The concept includes a modest elevator addition to provide accessible access to the orchestra and balcony levels, as well as access for back-of-house functions and loading. The proposal also includes exterior areas for loading and mechanical/electrical equipment.
The presentation addressed proposed floor plans, stage improvements, life-safety stair towers, seating layouts, acoustic improvements, and mechanical infrastructure. Three potential seating options were presented, ranging from approximately 550 to 613 seats, depending on row spacing, aisle configuration, and seating comfort. The study recommends retaining flexibility so that future decisions may be coordinated with an operating partner and business plan.

Following the presentation, discussion was held regarding whether to reopen the public portion for comment. It was noted that the report had been received for the first time that evening and should be made available to the public for review before additional comments are received at a future meeting.

Motion by Brian Coppolo, seconded by Dana Florenza, to reopen the public portion for comments regarding the Steinberg Hart presentation. Motion carried unanimously.
Public Portion -Reopened

Dave Condon commended Steinberg Hart on the quality and thoroughness of the study, stating that it was one of the most comprehensive theater studies he had reviewed. He cautioned that federal funding and tax credit opportunities may be uncertain and noted that state funding, grants from national historic theater organizations, and other fundraising sources should be explored. Mr. Condon stated that a realistic fundraising campaign may take approximately thirty-six months rather than twenty-four months and that construction financing may be supported by pledged commitments if a sufficient percentage of pledges is secured. He further stated that a business plan should consider revenue-producing uses within the building, including possible restaurant or tenant space, and emphasized the need to approach the project with realistic expectations regarding competitive bidding, construction costs, and rising material costs. Mr. Condon thanked Steinberg Hart for their work and stated that the study provided an important foundation for moving the project forward.

There being no further comments, the Commission returned to the regular order of business.

9. Adjournment
Motion to adjourn was made by Dana Florenza and seconded by Karleen Guluzzy The motion carried unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 7:42 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Jennifer Desroches